

INFIDELITY

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PART I:

LETTERS TO MY MISTRESS AND OTHER FRAGMENTS (2006)

As You Roused Me From My Bed, 01.02.06 -

As you roused me from my bed, so my memories of you have roused me, and they, like you, I have gone to meet – shrinking and inadequate though I am, unshod and bare-breasted.

I went to meet you because you had awoken and you had stayed too late. The wine had loosed its hold over you in your slumber – your head, like mine, chiming with a merry-go-round of strangely colored remembrances. I wondered if you might kiss me again, and you did, but the satisfaction of it had worn away with the drunkenness.

I had little opportunity but to prove to you the manner of man I was not. Such goodness was shown you

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as a consequence of our iniquity! I never treated a lady better, than when I kissed you, and went to lie with somebody else.

Your song all disconnected! I listened with eagerness from my station before the pot of rice, and I suggested to you – not that you were making use of too many chords – but that I was once in that habit, and it never hurt a song for me to do more with my mouth, and less with my fingers. Then I offered you wine – our evening was free to wander into some pleasant and inevitable disgrace. Sickening! It was inexorable, and we went to it mildly, as to the guillotine – cheered on by an invisible and prurient-minded host.

I would have stayed with you forever, if only because I am loyal to those who perpetrate acts of disloyalty with me. I was your seducer; deflated, I had no more wine, no more hours in the night, no more command of the vessel by which we had been transported. I kissed you. The kiss was meaningless, perfunctory, uncertain. Down the stairs

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you went, and out the door, and back to your mother's house.

I returned to bed and put my arm around my wife.

Morning Tears, 01.06.06 -

It's ten o'clock in the morning, and I have not yet had my first glass of brandy. I am drinking a tall glass of water; the air is wet and hot, but I have just put on a sweater. I'm shaking. I have taken, so far, one cup of coffee and two pills for a headache. I'm writing something, and this is not it. The morning is dying, and it is all the day I shall ever have; for when I go to the cabinet and bring down the brandy, I will bring the night down with it. My eyes will close and I will cry but a little.

Somebody in the Bordeaux region of France has very kindly bottled my tears for me, and provided me with a plastic cap, so that they do not remain bottled forever. The cap is spiraled on the inside; at the end of the spiral there rises an odor redolent of honey and indescribable loneliness. My glass, appropriately, is tear-shaped.

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Don't you understand that I am laboring to introduce you to culture? Mine is a culture of brandy from the Bordeaux region of France and tobacco that comes from Virginia in deep, plastic tubs. Mine is a culture of thoughts that never leave their cradles. Mine is a culture of indescribable loneliness. Don't you understand?

Don't you understand? Ah! The cat is with me again; I had not even made notice of her coming. Don't you understand? She is here, in my lap, her spine contorted according to my contours, her paws white as if she had been walking in ashes, the tip of her tail black, as if she had narrowly evaded the jaws of Hell, her fur gray as soot. And I am the sackcloth she wears. Don't you understand that I am the sackcloth she wears?

And I am a rocky ride. And I am an unsteady shoulder. And I am the sackcloth, the sackcloth she wears. And I am a dance, one two three, one two three, and I am the sackcloth she wears. I am the sackcloth, the sackcloth she wears. And my glass, appropriately, is tear-shaped.

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We will close our eyes and cry but a little.

A Letter to My Mistress, 04.05.06 –

What surprises me most is that your note came as a surprise to me – that I had somehow succeeded in erecting conscious bulwarks against the inevitability of your becoming dissatisfied or restless with the admittedly precarious nature of our romance. Until this point, I have postponed grappling with this reality; even now I find myself arguing against it – attempting to persuade myself that it must be otherwise. In fact, I am persuaded – so thoroughly that I can scarcely prevent myself from endeavoring to work the same persuasion upon you. Forward, then:

You are, all in all, very brilliant, and furthermore, clever, and furthermore, wise. You are cautious; and one of the reasons that you are so beautiful is that, unlike so many of our era, you are no lover of chaos – you are guarded against disorder and averse to imbalance. You are steady amidst the waves and this is why I have moored with you.

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Neither you nor I can withstand any but the most modest portion of uncertainty, and I have wanted – truly – to spare you vagaries, quibbles, and abstractions. I have – in your case – aimed for honesty, though I know my aim to be faulty.

The correct thing for me to say would be this: I want your friendship, and I will accept it however it is offered, regardless of the conditions. The truth, however, is this: I need your love, and I cannot imagine how I could endure its being retracted.

I earnestly beseech you to believe me when I say, in response to your concerns, that I have indeed figured my life out – I have indeed “gotten it together.” And there will always be aspects of life that are something less than perfectly certain, but you, dear, are not among these. Of you I am certain, and on this one point of certainty, I am prepared to stake all else.

I don’t believe that we’re on “shaky ground,” darling – though I cannot blame you for imagining that we are.

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The truth is that we do not yet fully trust our own strength. It is our courage alone that is failing, and once we find that, no ground will be too unstable. It is a matter, merely, of accustoming ourselves to the terrain: in this case (and it is an ancient but nevertheless peculiar circumstance), the terrain is that of devotion despite the semblance of infidelity, even iniquity. And though I know that I require much by asking for your faith in this regard, I must promise you that, in loving you as I do, I am being nothing if not perfectly faithful. Life is tumultuous, make no mistake; it does not always do to steady ourselves by placing our hands upon only one rock – by entrusting ourselves to the care of only one person. We ask too much of ourselves and others by expecting that a single companion will suffice to issue us through all of life's trials – come always to our relief, always to our comfort – as if all woes and ailments were of the same substance and therefore require precisely the same remedy. I am a man who is both broken and pierced. I cannot expect one person to be both my splint and my bandage. Likewise, I cannot expect that everything you require is within my

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capacity to fulfill; I too am limited. But in my way, I am vital to you, just as you are vital to me.

What we have is not, as you said, a “semblance of a relationship.” What we have, I assure you, is a romance – a real and legitimate romance. Although its conventionality may well be called into question, its truth – its actuality – its propriety must not be. It is rare, yes, but it is by no means unprecedented – even in these times, when so much that was once quite plain is hidden, and so much that was once hidden, made plain. If our love is unusual, it is because it is uncommon – but I can imagine no love, no romance, no relationship that is more *valid* than ours. That it must be maintained with care and secrecy does not reduce its validity, any more than the three-week life expectancy of your beloved French resistance fighters reduced the validity of their cause; it is a symptom of the conditions which society has imposed – something that we must accept, as they did. But unlike the subjects of your misplaced photograph, we are not doomed – or in any case, we need not presume ourselves to be. With patience and wit, our love can be perpetual – and forever sweet.

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I do not – could not – ask that you give me your whole heart; indeed, this was never possible for either of us. I do not ask that you attempt to place our relationship within any category with which Society has already furnished you, or for which it has prepared you. We must exercise our genius; we must expect nothing to be simple. We must ourselves invent the parameters of our love and be keen to the consequences of error; but we must not give ourselves over to trepidation.

I beg you not to leave my life incomplete; I beg you not to leave me thus in terror and anguish. Consider yourself and consider my love for you; don't deprive yourself of that which I give so willingly, in such purity, and in such good measure. Know that, *insofar as one can never truly possess another*, I am entirely yours, should you choose to accept me.

A Letter to My Mistress, 05.18.06 –

One of the most beautiful and terrifying aspects of living in this area, is the readiness with which one sees how

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intellectually degraded and spiritually stultified the greater portion of the population is, and with what ease one could unwittingly find oneself counted among that number. The admixture of rural tendencies and metropolitan influences – the misery of the lowest classes, the inhumanity of the highest – gives us an uncommon sense of the imbalances within ourselves, and the failure inherent to finding oneself settling into either of the two extremes. It also proves to those of us observant enough to take due note, that everyone is equally miserable, and that attributable to and concomitant with this misery is a specious idea of dignity, which takes on different attributes according which side of the socio-economic spectrum one finds oneself. Ultimately, this is the source of our misery. In our desire for individual dignity, we forget that the better portion of our duty is to help those whom we encounter, and among whom we exist, to remember their own. Far from understanding this, however, we are embarrassed by the lack of dignity shown by our class, and anxious to distance ourselves, we endeavor to have ourselves associated with the class above the one into which fate has placed us, which is – truth be

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told – no more dignified, and no happier. All classes are defined and distinguished by one aspect and one aspect only: the methods that they mistakenly employ in order to allay or forget their misery. Even so, our methods are quite alike, differing only in regards to semantics: the expense of our dissolution.

This is relevant to you only as regards your decision to continue with college or not to, to work as a waitress or not to, and if you do, then where, and so on. What you fear is the same as what I fear: we both worry that, despite all of our efforts to place ourselves outside of the confines of commonness, we may nevertheless awaken very suddenly to our own ordinariness, and awaken too late. This same fear overcomes me when, at my job, I find my own personality subordinated beneath that of my “company face,” and – for what it’s worth – I inadvertently perform my task better than my sense of individualist pride would presumably allow. The same is true of my college work, when, merely to make matters easier and more propitious for myself, I write my essays according to my professor’s guidelines, while inserting my own idiosyncrasies only when

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certain that the professor will find no cause to object. I make these concessions with the hope that, by momentarily forgetting my quite useless individual pride, I will be recompensed later on a practical level, with a good grade, or a promotion, or what-have-you.

Compare this, however, to the student who is too proud to condescend to his professor's demands, and ends badly with poor grades, no degree, wasted time, wasted tuition, and no tangible successes to speak of. Compare this also to the slovenly fellow who, being too "proud" to take the menial work available to persons of his station, elects to work not at all, and in consequence, degenerates into a state of chronic laziness and social parasitism, ending full of pride, but devoid of dignity, and with nothing whatsoever to be proud of. Of these sorts this locality abounds, and we have known many answering to these or similar descriptions.

If you wish to be proud of yourself, remember this: that pride is of no use to a person who feels it alone, according only to his own discrimination. It is very easy for

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a person to feel proud, but if the source of his pride is not acknowledged or appreciated by the company he keeps, or the society in which he finds himself, its substance is debased, and it becomes mere arrogance and presumption. One can hold easily to arrogance in any state and in any society, but one will find oneself – for the effort – an object of general disfavor; and it is too much to ask of any person to love himself, when society on the whole shows him disdain. Your obvious course then, is merely to endeavor to be a person that society – or the portion of society with whom you are concerned – finds agreeable, admirable, and even noteworthy. I know that I find you to be noteworthy. By holding fast to the pursuit of these qualities, while eschewing arrogance whenever and however you might, you are – I believe – bound for success and happiness on some level, be it social, personal, material, or all three.

The point that I am really trying to make is this. It has taken me twenty-three years to realize that contentment is not acquired by degrees; one cannot accrue happiness, and joys are not to be accumulated upon joys. It is the

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same, one must admit, with sorrows: they can neither be multiplied nor divided. Life, precisely as it is for each of us, is one great joy and one great sorrow, and the one – like the stars of the night sky – do not disappear at the coming of the other, but are merely obscured, and then, only for a moment. Practically speaking, none of us has cause to be happy, and likewise, none of us has cause to be unhappy. Because these emotions are ours to feel, we alone are responsible for them, just as we are responsible for our own conduct, and therefore, our own semblance of dignity. We hear often, from kindly sources, that “there is no recipe for happiness,” but with this comes the error of believing that happiness is a combination of elements, which varies according to “individual taste.” No – in this world, there is only one Happiness and one Sorrow, and it is necessary for us – as persons seeking truth and completeness – to be attuned to both. This done, we may plunge into the Illusion as others do, carrying with us the advantage of knowing that we are no more the source of other persons’ joy or grief, than they are the source of ours. We all share the same Joy and the same Grief. The grief of the murderer

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becomes the grief of the victim; the joy of the benefactor becomes the joy of the beneficiary.

With you – my “fascinating creature” – I naively sought to acquire one more source of happiness, which I presumed – noting my imagined inner lack – I did not already possess. You were, in this sense, the apple that tipped the apple cart. Having no true reason to feel dissatisfied with my life as it was already, upon pursuing a romance with you, I began to buckle under the weight of excess, and suffer all the injuries and discomforts of any man who has taken on more than he can sustain. And, since you were my newest and fondest perceived source of joy, I madly came to believe that, in order to enjoy this one apple, I would make a sacrifice of the entire cart, though its contents comprised my life. Upon seeing the cart overturned, however, and realizing the extent of my folly, I found myself racing to recover what I had all but lost, and restore it, bruised and soured, to its original state. For everything a consequence, however; my life will never be as it was before we met, and I find my succor in the reality that the events that upset the outward calm of my existence

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were the inevitable result of a surging inner maelstrom, which could forbear manifestation not an instant longer. Unhappiness possessed me, and blind or forgetful as I was of its true source, I turned to you, to weigh the scales again upon the side of happiness, or relief from my consuming dolor. And you brought me happiness – truly you did. But that which you brought me was choked with guilt, stifled by apprehension, and adumbrated by the grotesque inevitability that crackled and fulminated more furiously over us with every moment we spent together. I was enslaved by terror; but rather than showing fear, I embraced you more desperately, and embraced my destruction, wanting only an end – indifferent to the means by which it came. I was, I have since realized, enraged at Love – and it was at Love Itself that aimed my futile assault – expecting that I could agonize Love the way Love had agonized me; disfigure Love the way Love had disfigured me; prevail against Love the way Love had prevailed against me. My kisses were envenomed, my touch, an act of vengeance. In my heart, I loved you, yet I made you the effigy upon which I spent my insatiable scorn; divided by

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this contradiction – well! You saw my madness! But I would rather have died than reveal to you the fullness of my malady.

I have recently been reading a long essay by Albert Camus, in which he says that, “Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition.” It is easy to see that as much as my affair with you was a response to fascination, it was also an act of rebellion: a crazed effort, not to possess you, but indeed, to gain possession of myself. “Irrational” and delirious as I was, I had come to feel that my marriage, and the mode of life into which marriage had brought me, was an “unjust and incomprehensible condition,” from which I could be liberated only by a sort of suicide – or beyond this – a manner of murder.

The Kingdom, 06.26.06 –

I sometimes feel as if I have been day-dreaming. I stand up – my body still taut from the force of my meditations – and pass my eyes over the room; this house that shelters me,

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these effects that bind us to our superficial concerns. The things that belong to my wife. The things that belong to my daughter. The things that are supposed to belong to me. The result of vulgar accumulation – the physical definition of squalor. And I ask myself, *why isn't this enough?* For just an instant, I nearly question the reality of the Kingdom.

The question occurs in a flash and vanishes with a flicker – swallowed by the vacuum of its own irrationality. A sweep of my hand, and I am alone again, and separate. I return to the Kingdom, owning nothing of this world, being nothing in this world – just as I have always known. My wife and daughter are corpses, and these trappings are the trappings of a tomb. Our lives are as hollow as skeletons.

We have looked into the eyes of our dead lovers and perceived the fullness of their non-existence. Our lips have moved to say (though we have restrained them), “Come no closer; my love will break against your hardness.” We have sought to provide rest, but have found no rest ourselves. We want for nothing but the end of desire. Covering our

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mouths, holding our breaths, we tiptoe over the innumerable Dead. They have no stomachs; they are always hungry and always gorged. *Come lie with us*, they moan in their sleep – and if not for the stench, you think that perhaps you would. Because maybe, you think, there is no Kingdom after all.

Corpses teach us nothing. We can only look them over and find evidence of what killed them. We are always asking: *Why life?* How do life and death differ, and how do we know ourselves to be living, and others to be dead? The truth is that, to the dead, there is no difference. They stick to their own – they collide and consume. They are the food and the devourers of their fellows, and finding no fellows, they feed on themselves. This isn't metaphor. Look at the world.

Our experience of reality is nothing other than continuous horror and perpetual disbelief. The snapping of bones, the resounding of skull on skull, flesh torn for the feeding of flesh, the grinding of teeth, the awful, meaningless cycle. New corpses are born; they are

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introduced to the carnage and scream for their first taste of it. They will know nothing else: they stink from conception – they rot in their cradles.

We are called for wondrous purposes. We are called to smoke the tobacco plant and to slice our skin with razors. We are called to curse everything and to be initiated into the Curse. We are called to the brothels and to the institutions of harlotry. We are called to spread disease and to accept our payment of pestilence, shame, and gruesome ravening. We are called to corruption. “In death, all are equal.” One corpse is as good as another.

I wake and the dream still surrounds me. I stand and I find myself shackled. The light of the Kingdom illuminates the letters of gore and feces upon my four walls. I pace for hours with my shoulder to the rugged stones. I find a sharp pebble, and rolling it about with my palm to my forehead, I remember how to smile by remembering how to bleed. *Where are the corpses?* I wonder to myself. *I’m hungry. I’m hungry and I want to die.*

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I want to dance like a dervish, with my heart in the mouth of my beloved.

I was free from delusion for a matter of hours, and I happened to recall that Religion began with a burial rite. Civilization is only as high as the bones stacked beneath it. Love, Love! We are corpses and whores, both of us! I knew this very long ago, and thanks to your kisses, I have remembered. If I forget again, all the pleasures of decomposition will be lost to me. Love! Harlot, retain me.

This really happened! We were hiding in the shadows of our favorite alley, there across from the old graveyard in the center of town. Strange cars slammed their doors; strange voices played like fingers on our nerves. You wanted a lover and I wanted an accomplice. I said, "I have two clean razors in the pocket of my bag." You told me to hush, but I wouldn't, because I was desperate to die. I said, "We could lay together here, with our arms gushing bravely, and all the force of our heartbeats behind them. We could die here together, and they'd find us in the morning, when our blood dries on the lip of the gutter."

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I thought we should write a note, but you were against it. I said, “Fine, then we shall be the note, and those who are able, will study the meaning.”

I tried to be a Christian, but I can’t help feeling betrayed by the Resurrection. What’s the reward of a transient and uncertain life, if it’s not the permanence and certainty of death?

The Idolater, Part I, 09.20.06 –

*HAIL TO OSIRIS! THE TWICE-BORN, THE
DEATHLESS, HAIL!*

Pardon my outburst. It seemed right, in the assumption of this undertaking, to begin - as the old poets did - with an invocation. I wish that every new endeavor in this world were approached with the same solemnity; the same attention to ritual. These are merely scribblings on a page (or rather, on a screen), yet by placing at their head the name of a god, I have already consecrated them. I have already turned my writing into a holy act. Now, I suppose, the challenge that remains is that of writing something

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worthy of the god under whose name, and for whose pleasure, I have implied my intention to work.

My "outburst", as I have called it, was self-originating. By this I mean that I wrote it without intending to. I mean, in fact, that I had intended to begin by invoking some god or another, but that - until I wrote "Hail to Osiris!" I had no clear idea which god to invoke. I could say that the invocation was inspired by some silent effort of my subconscious, but that would be the same as saying that it was inspired by the god himself. We know too much about nature nowadays, and so all of our gods have been exiled to that place that we vaguely define as our "inner reality", and have become symbolic. Our faith today is placed in the television meteorologist, and it is to his altar that we go each morning, clasping in both hands our oblation of freshly percolated coffee. In the gods, we have no faith, other than that by which we are daily assured that they either exist or do not. We whose faith lies on the side of belief refuse all facts that arise contrarily to our convictions; while we whose faith has been lodged in disbelief are only hardened by the appeals of our primitive

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hearts, for which beating in a godless chest becomes, at length, a stale and ungratifying task.

I am, I must admit, a primitive soul, and therefore a person of faith. I find so little to love in the material world, that I must either place my affections upon Something immaterial, or find some tiny, cynical comfort in contriving a suitably despondent method of physical suicide. Well, it is suicide either way. A person of faith disposes his soul into the cache of his deity, while keeping his body for the purpose that that deity has ostensibly decreed; whereas a person without faith hordes his soul in darkness (since he will not acknowledge that it exists) and loses his body to the vain and pitiful pursuit of temporal experience, believing the earth to be the widest expanse he will ever be able to travel. One who holds heaven as his goal knows that this goal can be easily reached, though his world consists of nothing but four walls and a short chain. But men of carnal temperaments are appeased by nothing, and see in death only the imponderable horror of an end to their appetites, and an end to their lunatic quest for the

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experience against which all previous and future experiences may be measured.

Think of the person who calls himself a collector, for instance, of rare coins, or comic books, or automobiles, and lives only to make acquisition upon acquisition. If his collection were ever improvidently made complete, he could no longer be called a collector.

When I was a young boy, I often saw advertisements on television by which I was enjoined to collect every piece of a particular line of toys. And though my parents were terribly poor, I would annoy them with my frantic desire to have - in my possession - just one "complete collection" of anything: any series of toy, book, or senseless bric-a-brac. It was a goal that I somehow achieved a number of times: first with a full set of a half-dozen or so rubber superhero figurines, acquired over the course of a year or so, and then with a few series of comic books, which were either published as a limited series, or published for only a short time and very quickly canceled. And as one might easily suppose, the completion of each collection was never

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anything but a cause for depression - never jubilation, and never triumph. Acquisition, I learned, is never an absolute end. If one must want anything, it is better that he want something infinite, so that he never be faced with the deflating experience of attaining his desire, and finding it to have been empty, frivolous, and disappointed.

This scenario may be replicated on any scale at all, whether it be a child with his trifles, or a conqueror with his armies. Every conqueror has desired to possess the globe, but in the end, no single empire has ever encompassed every boundary, nor even a whole continent. Revolutionaries and idealists, once their visions are achieved, become merely tyrants, or victims of their own fervor. If Marx and Engels ever actually established the society they described, nobody would now read their Communist Manifesto; it would lose its power to fascinate, if it were proved realizable, and therefore fallible.

I began my quest for a new god about five years ago, when I was eleven years old. My reason for this, whether I knew it then or not, was because the god that I had

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inherited from my parents had become altogether too real, too present, and too knowable. My parents' breed of charismatic evangelical Christianity contained no mysteries, no rituals, no dramas or uncertainties. God, as he was given to me, was Love - perfect in justice, with nothing to conceal. And although Jesus was the center of our worship, he had been nearly completely stripped of his potency as a deity, insofar as it was mandated that I was to regard him as my "best friend," whom I could walk with, talk with, laugh with, cry with, dance with, play with, etc., just as I would any earthly companion. The exquisite drama of his passion and his agony upon the cross was mainly forgotten and passed over; an old spot of unpleasantness that was now quite obscured by the unfading brilliance of God's forgiveness, which was never in question, because God forgives by nature. I had, in fact, no religion to speak of. My parents believed in man's relationship with his creator and his savior - a relationship that admitted of no boundaries - a literal friendship, by which our affection for our deities was as pure and palpable as our deities' affection for us. Prayer was mere conversation, during which

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anything might be said, however mundane, trivial, or irreverent. God was to be approached as a regular fellow, with a slap on the back and a hearty how-goes-it.

It occurred to me, at the approach of adolescence, that my experience of divinity centered more upon the cookies served during Fellowship Hour, than this "relationship" I was to be carrying on with God, which had become a dreary and inescapable aspect of the day-to-day. I would close the door of my little room, immediately feel Jesus' presence, and ask Him to go away and leave me to my own private thoughts. God, who ought to have been sacred, seemed to be an intruder, and a violator of my increasingly more cherished solitude. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost - they allowed me not a moment's peace! In a final act of oppressed desperation, I resolved that if my current deities could not learn to respect my need for privacy, I should simply have to find new deities - old, respectable deities - who would.

It is interesting now to note that, although I had fancied myself an amateur Egyptologist throughout the

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whole of my childhood, my first inquiries into (shall I say) *alternative* deities began with the Nordic and Germanic gods whom my ancestors would have revered. After months of research, though, I at length concluded that the inhabitants of Asgard were, on the whole, too hoary and vigorous a band, to suit my mainly genteel and withdrawn disposition. I left them to the bellicose amusements in which they were eternally engrossed.

Being, as I was, in the flower of pubescence, I looked next to the Romantics and their white-limbed Hellenic pantheon. I found interest in the ecstasies of Dionysus, but since I was not yet of drinking age, could not yet fully appreciate the source of his rapture, nor go very far myself towards its attainment. Also, I found my heart captured by the story of Hades and Persephone, and came near to proclaiming myself a proselyte of this brooding prince of Elysium and his woeful, unsubmitting helpmeet. But I could not resign myself to fully venerating a pair of deities, of which one held the other against her will, and she held him in perpetual contempt. Inevitably, I would be forced to choose either the god's side or the goddess'. I

could never enjoy their favors equally. These, therefore, I left to their sullen and intractable quandary.

My induction into the cult, if I am permitted to term it thus, of Osiris and Isis, was – like the purest and happiest of loves – neither rhapsodic nor particularly abrupt. As stated above, I had already some procured some childish level of expertise regarding ancient Egypt, its customs and beliefs, and was now so familiar with its many and multifarious gods and goddesses, that their mysteries had all but lost their sheen in my eyes. Additionally, I was moderately familiar with the legends regarding Isis, especially those in which she was set as a rival to Ra (in any of his numerous combinations), but had – by some implausible happenstance – either never learned, or forgotten my previous knowledge of – the legends surrounding Isis' husband and brother, the august king Osiris. It was as if I had committed all the bible to memory, but allowed the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ to evade my notice entirely!

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I amended this intolerable state of affairs when, at the age of fourteen, after two years and many months of aimless and exasperating study into heathen and heretical traditions of every conceivable derivation, I left a certain large bookstore – having acquired some money during the holiday season – carrying two thick volumes by the prodigious historian and translator, Mr. E. A. Wallace Budge, unostentatiously titled *Osiris*, books I & II. I recall, at the time of purchasing the books, that merely seeing them together upon the shelf, crushed between dozens of volumes of garish sensationalism of the popular variety, caused me a measure of reflexive regret, by which I was made to think that these two books – so stately of bearing – deserved, and indeed *demand*ed, to be ushered away. I was not even perceptibly curious about their contents. The purchase of these books was, it may be argued, my first unconscious act of devotion to the Divine Siblings.

The Divine Siblings! So I call them now. And now it seems as if I had set out, from my first word, to devote a book to them. But you know, my dear, clever reader, that it was never so – for you recall that, though I began my

ruminations with an invocation of Osiris, I did so without intending to, answering only the spontaneous efflux of my subconscious. So that first, it seems Osiris commanded the book, and then commanded that he be the subject.

My reader! Of what follows, we shall both be made pupils.

The Idolater, Part II, 09.20.06 –

Dear Suzanne, I'm looking for a priestess. Your eyes are dark enough, I'd say, and your skin is dark enough, and your hair is dark enough. And your mother, she is dark - I believe she must be partly Oriental. It hardly shows in you, except for in your *secrecy*, for we know that the Orient is a place of secrets. And the secret of the Orient is balance. Isis is the Healer, Osiris is the Corpse. I'm looking for balance. I'm looking for a priestess.

There is the problem with the Trinity. The purest form that three points may achieve together is that of a pyramid, which consists of two parts: a peak and a base. If the Father is the peak, then the Son and the Holy Ghost

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must together comprise the base, which means that they are equal. We are authorized to worship the Father and the Son, but we are not authorized to worship the Holy Ghost, although we are permitted to call upon him. It is his presence, purportedly, which has supplanted that of the ascended Christ, whom we can nevertheless access through prayer. But if Christ is the Source, and the Holy Ghost is the medium, the two could not be equals, because power descends from one, to be delivered by the other. Surely the courier is never equal in rank to the Lord whose seal he bears!

Suzanne, I'm looking for an equal. That I could make you equal to me in authority, and equal to me in presence, is my crowning desire. Your silence is assent enough! But I take your hand, and you will not move. I touch your lips but receive no kiss. Sorceress, don't you know that your smiles are benedictions, and your scowls are curses? But your words! Your words are words of power - and if they are but few, it is to this rareness that their brilliance is owed.

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You open your mouth, Suzanne, and forth comes the memory of bartered cigarettes, and forth comes the augury of power squandered, and forth comes a smile that anticipates its own extinction and will by no argument be preserved. You'll die young, Suzanne; younger than I ever knew you to be. Your death will be a party, to which I can expect that I will not be invited.

You take all my pieces, and you pay no attention to the order in which you assemble them. You take my scrolls; you refuse to read them. You're impatient to leave my chamber. You'll leave me to the grave-robbers, and to my crippled clay servants, and to the black Khepera beetles that nestle in my wrapping and burrow into the vacant cavities of my imploded torso.

Twenty seconds pass, and through the telephone I hear a breath of laughter. We have nothing to say to each other, Suzanne. It's half past midnight. Let's hang up.

PART II:

MISCELLANEOUS ENTRIES FROM

2006

“I can only hope that one day I’ll find another guy who’ll be as smitten with me as you were.” A line written with all the pathos and sensitivity that I’ve come to expect from Lorelei Black. She must have realized that she was writing to the world’s last true romantic—the last man on Earth who is capable of being smitten—of not only falling in love, but of beating himself upon Love’s stony floor until all sense has forsaken him and death beckons cordially at every window he sees.

Lorelei asks more than she knows. It’s one thing to be smitten; it’s another to be bankrupted by the price of Camel cigarettes. Her greatest difficulty will doubtless be finding another man who, like me, believes that a pretty girl can never smoke too much, but, unlike me, possesses the

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wherewithal to pay for it. For me, the question was always this: Will it be the love-marks on my throat or the deficit in our bank account—created in six-dollar increments—that my wife takes note of first? Or will it be the lighters mistakenly left behind in the bedroom? She comes home late and finds me sleeping, presuming, incorrectly, that I'm drunk. The brandy bottle is still full to the crest of the label, and it's the soles of my shoes that have been diminished. A mile to meet Lorelei, a mile to bring her back, a mile to walk her home, and a mile to return to my own. (May 10)

“Oh God, the hat's back,” she said; then she took it off my head and placed it on her own, saying, “I look ridiculous in this.” And I could have said, “You never look ridiculous,” but the truth is that she always does, and therein lies her irresistible appeal. I am compelled by my nature to take seriously that which no one else can, and to adore her at whom the world scoffs and sniggers.

Who could place a measure on our madness? First I spoke of the reason that I could never leave my wife, then

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we spoke of how we must get married, for it is the sentence, for it is the sentence to which Fate has most assuredly doomed us, and to battle against it would be to doom ourselves. And every muscle and organ within me shouted and clamored: *Marry me, Lorelei!* As though I had forgotten that in this country, a man is permitted but one wife at a time, and mine was several streets away, blackening a portion of a faintly-lit living room window, waiting for her one-and-only, true and unselfish husband.

Lorelei and I had found ourselves sitting with our backs to another brick wall, in another undiscovered alley of our hushed and sullen Kingston, both of us crazy with love. Both of us ridiculous as a pair of fugitive school children, gravely sucking on our cigarettes, and knowing, in our minds, that we were *stars*—that our movements were studied—that our audience would forgive us anything, short of giving up the lie. Because it's not our lie anymore. The queue is formed; the tickets are non-refundable.

When this ends, no one will be happy but our Audience, who paid to leave in tears, clutching whomever

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they came with, and professing sincerely in their absolute freedom from doubt. (June 24)

What hinders me, father, is that I'm not looking for Heaven, nor am I seeking to know God, nor to understand his purpose in forming the universe. However pernicious the effects of my rebellion seem, I'm sure that I cannot upset the designs of an omnipotent God, but must in some sense be conforming to theses, and can therefore do no actual harm to anyone....

Looking at these books, I am reminded of Amanda. Looking at anything, I am reminded of Amanda. But I don't think I ever liked her as much as I remember liking her, and if she were here now, I imagine that I would secretly wish her away. Just looking at her got boring. Eventually, I had to touch her, and doing so, I found that she was merely flesh—her stomach, her tongue, and everything. And apart from the taste of steel that never left her mouth, there was nothing at all new about her, and my efforts had been for nothing.

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I heard a conversation once, in which a man from Maine was complaining that, upon visiting Boston, he found the lobster there to be less delectable than its reputation would have had him believe, and that beyond this, it was priced beyond any lobster's worth. And I recall thinking to myself that the only reason one would ever eat a lobster, be it in Maine, Boston, or anywhere, would be to brag afterwards that he had paid a grand price to do so.

Now I'm finished with Amanda, and Amanda's finished with me, and neither of us have anything to brag about. But I think better of her now that she's gone, and damned if that's not the point. There is no pleasure in life but the pleasure of desiring. There is no pleasure in actually eating lobster—only in desiring the reputation of one who could pay well to do so. There is no pleasure in kissing a girl, but only in showing that you possess the means to cause her to want to kiss you. I could kiss Dorothy in Cape Cod, I could kiss Lorelei in Boston, I could kiss Amanda in the parking lot where I used to throw beer bottles with Rinebold. But I'm always cracking the shell of the same ugly animal, dragged from the same slimy

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sea, and eating the same unsatisfying portion of the same dead meat. (June 25)

She wouldn't wish this upon me. She never sought to bring turmoil upon me, nor to have turmoil brought upon herself. She would have escaped this long ago, had I allowed her—had I not been so tenacious. She saw this coming and she tried to spare me, the angel! Kindly she tried, and was by kindness prevented.

Speak plainly, you idiot! You liar! For once, speak the truth plainly and tell the world all that it must hear. It does no good to instruct with riddles and undirected allusions. You cannot expect the world to share your mind already; they must be slowly introduced and slowly converted.

You'll do the girl no good by obscuring her in vagaries. Let the world see her, let the world know her, and the world will love her as you do, and forgive you the crimes committed for her sake. We each know ourselves as creatures of noble error, and we seek our vindication in the noble errors recorded of others. Show yourself to be

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faultless, and rather than gathering around you, the world will gather against you, and will pay you attention only long enough for the faults that you hid to be uncovered and laid out in public view. The world may fear strength, but it loves weakness; show it weakness therefore, if you desire to be loved. (June 28)

What was our romance, after all? It was wasted afternoons with nothing written, lying guiltily on our stolen bed, fretting for ourselves. It was tedium bought from the purse of terror. And beyond all of this, it was merely friendship, of a sort that none could condemn. Who were we, my friend, to imagine ourselves above Virtue; and is it not a relief to us that we have been discovered and obliged to reform? The heart rebels against all restraints, but the essence of virtue is constancy.

Imagine yourself on a dark path with two tiny flames to guide you. The first flame dashes wildly to and fro, wheeling this way, careening that way, dancing and fluttering and feigning, and sometimes plunging out of site, begging to be pursued and with difficulty recovered. The

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second flame moves steadily and at a sober pace; it traces the path exactly and illuminates every danger; it comforts you when you falter and preserves you from exhaustion. Supposing life is a path, and not merely a senseless daydream full of torrid amusements and incomprehensible travails—which flame is better to follow? Shall we blunder drunkenly into heartbreak and ruin, or shall we accept the guidance offered us by the faithful torch of Philosophy? The lowest of beasts knows that it is mad to court danger and ridiculous to seek harm.

This is why we must live simply and work diligently. Opulence leads to presumption, and idleness (we all know) to dissipation. Wicked is the infatuation that causes us to live restlessly, that brings us no peace. If you say that you are sick with love, then the truth is that love is your sickness. Poison requires an antidote, and disease a cure. For the malady of love to cease its afflictions upon you, it must be driven away by Reason and Fortitude, which are the most trustworthy of solaces. (July 17)

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I despise how often I drive past graveyards, without ever going in—speeding forward with the idea that something more pressing and more important lies ahead of me, and I cannot spare the time. For the graves, I have no time.

But the time I have now is time spent standing above the gravestones, looking down upon them; and it is troubling to ponder how soon it shall be until the positions are reversed, and it is my gravestone that shall be standing over *me*.

When I am buried, I should not like for my grave to be hurried past, for my last remaining monument to be disregarded. A life worth remembering, I should like to say, is a life spent in remembrance. A moment paid is a moment due to the payer; a life lived for the living's sake will prove worthless when one is dead.

Life frightens me more than death. The appetites of the living are a bafflement to me; the longer I observe them, the less I understand, and the greater grows my horror. The graves, at least, are quiet—with only one thing to proclaim: I WAS. (August 15)

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I'm only one man, and time passes for me at the same speed as it does for everyone else. I could only ever afford to spend my energies on girls who were clearly requesting to be seduced. I am no longer the kind that will compromise his dignity in an uncertain pursuit. Some predators chase their prey—others lie in wait. And it is only in my case that Patience ceases to earn its regard as a virtue.

Although I shrink in abhorrence from every variety of arachnid, the so-called Daddy Longlegs is the only species that I can, from a distance, somewhat admire. Its life is spent in nearly perfect stillness, with an unerring knowledge that eventually, something must find itself ensnared upon its web—that its meal will arrive in the fullness of time. The Daddy Longlegs does not even spin its own web. It squats in a web that another spider has since abandoned. It does no work at all. It exerts itself on nothing. It merely waits; and the rewards of its waiting are to be seen dangling, bled of all life, from every strand of the Patient One's requisitioned web.

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There is no manly quality more irresistible to a woman than that of certainty and composure. Agitation and desperation are repugnant. Women prefer men who could take them or leave them without losing a single night's sleep either way. (August 17)

The United States of America is a warlike and divisive country, because it is always at war and always divided. The government, from the lowest posts to the highest, consists of persons who, in order to be elected to the offices they hold, were obliged to wage rhetorical combat against other contestants, and to stoop to slander and self-aggrandizement. In order to attain the apparent dignity of a public office, one must first debase oneself as a beggar, a flatterer, and a braggart. The people remain low-minded because its leaders must employ low means to gain their support. They bark and whine, to win the love of dogs. (Undated)

From an Unsent Correspondence:

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When last we spoke, we turned our discourse upon the subject of luck, and how often it favors those who seem to have the least need of it. But peer around at the clamoring circus of simpletons that crowd every corner of the world about us, and we must concede how shameful it would be to want or to possess the love of such a nauseating horde. What could be worse, my friend, than being found pleasing by those thoughtless beings, who have never suffered us to have the barest moment's pleasure? If we gain their love, let the victory be no medal upon our own breasts, but a mark of infamy and derision upon theirs.

Now I find myself speaking contemptuously, as if this single life—the only life that I possess, and the lonely life that I am promised—is a mere annoyance, like a fly to be waved away. But when I have waved my life away, what tranquility comes after? What am I assured, but that which I have already in hand? Life is intolerable and death is imponderable. For all my ruminations, why can I not philosophize my way into a single moment's peace of mind? Is it the world that oppresses me, or my own thoughts—indeed—my own love of thinking?

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It's just as my mother has said so many times before: "You've gone and thought yourself into a hole again." I'm plainly unsuited to a world of matter.

As I sit, hammering this letter upon the page, I am in the same doleful position to which I nightly return: crippled with terror at the thought of retiring, only to assume the same sordid burden again tomorrow.

How selfish I am! None of us is alone in his aimless march. The world is broad; we bear it together. If I fall away, my absence will not be long noted, and my name will be trampled, and buried, and utterly forgotten. The point is not that I desire my own burden to be lighter, but that I desire not to make another person's heavier—though he may conspire to do the same to me.

I don't even know what I'm writing anymore. (December 8)

PART III:

AN ADULTERER'S DIARY (2006)

"Amanda" - 03.12.06

It was a great comfort to me to see that Amanda has found me on the Web and asked for my telephone number, having already given me hers. I spoke in my last entry of my uncertainty regarding her; now I worry that she has read as much and, as a logical consequence, determined that she would withdraw her own attentions. To obviate this most undesirable of eventualities, I should like to explain myself in greater depth, and better explore the roots of my only half-formed and too-hasty misgivings.

The precise circumstances by which I came to imagine that there is a propensity for pettiness in Amanda were these: First, she spoke (and spoke with seemingly uncharacteristic eagerness) of taking advantage of her Aunt's impending vacation, to hold in the latter's house a number of parties –

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the principle purpose of which will be the attainment of drunkenness, along – I must presume – with the multitude of indiscretions concomitant with that state.

Secondly: While following her habit of rummaging through other persons' bags, in this case that of a good-hearted fellow named Timothy, she found a tiny vile of Tabasco sauce, and curious as this discovery was, her response to it was more curious still: For the moment the vile was in her hands, she unplugged the top and shook out the (admittedly) meager contents, until not a drop remained. Then she closed the top again and restored the object, now quite useless, to Timothy's bag. Timothy did protest a little, but as he is so thoroughly good-natured, I could hardly discern whether his indignation was in earnest or not. Within myself, however, I thought Amanda's act to have been thoughtless and ill-mannered.

Now, as regards my first account, it is not fair that I should disparage an nineteen year-old girl's desire for the comforts of intoxication, nor the comforts of companionship, nor even the pursuit of both in the same

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stroke. According to Amanda, her aunt knows of Amanda's designs, and does not profess to care; her vacation goes forward unimpeded, despite the danger that her young charge, who is only obeying the inclinations of her age, inevitably faces. If it is under the care of so lax and disinterested a guardian that Amanda has come to maturity, the young woman can hardly be faulted for making inadvisable decisions.

The vile of Tabasco sauce presents a less obviously soluble dilemma. This appeared to be something Amanda did merely for the pleasure of observing the reactions in those present, and in Timothy himself. The act was harmless enough, but it did cast an unmistakable shadow upon the girl's character, which may, for all I know, have been her whole intention. Amanda may be uncomfortable with the idea of any person coming to any given conclusion regarding her, which may not be arbitrarily contradicted at any moment. In this way, Amanda may be distancing herself from the idea that she is obligated to any person, including herself; she is leaving those around her with no mistake – no choice but to conclude that she is not above

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even the most inexplicable of shifts or reversals, and as such, must never be counted upon for anything. Thus, she is never responsible; and moreover, she is free to be irresponsible. More than being an act of perniciousness, the discarding of Timothy's Tabasco sauce was merely an exhibition of wanton social irresponsibility; and it is in the light of such acts that Amanda can abuse her aunt's trust (however it may be defined) by holding Bacchanalian revels in her absence. In other words, if Amanda succeeds in establishing – for everyone around her – that nothing she does is shocking, she will effectively succeed in convincing herself that now, by their reckoning, everything is permissible, under the inviolable law of individual entropy.

Of course, I shall never make the mistake of saying that all things that are explainable, are therefore excusable; the profoundest and most imponderable of enormities may each be traced back to some specious justification or another. But I too have seen my days of riotous youth, when my virtue and well-being were not adequately being guarded by those parents whose care I had not yet left; I remember all too well my own outrages, my abuses of their

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tender credulity. The consequences thereof remain with me today.

There are many qualities in Amanda to which I am yet drawn. She is like Juliet, in that, however she affronts me, I will never bring myself to cease caring for her, and to give her my ear – and my arm – when ought either are required.

"Gifts" - 03.12.06

Amanda has an absorbing habit of digging at the ground with the ends of sticks. When I first saw her doing this, it was for the purpose of burying a sunflower seed, though several people told her that the seed had been baked, and would never grow. Nevertheless, she had me find a stone with which to mark the spot, so that she could observe its progress in the future. And today, while we were walking together, she found a stick by the sidewalk and began plowing with it into the earth. The day was damp, however, and the stick saturated, rotting, and weak; it snapped abruptly at the center and left Amanda looking downcast.

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She has the most remarkable visage. Her features are, at most times, absolutely straight – showing no emotion or affectation whatsoever, and she possesses the rare and unsettling ability to look directly into one’s eyes, absolutely unwavering, for incredible durations. I have so far been unable to meet her stare directly for more than a minute at a time, so for all I can tell, she can do this for an eternity without becoming exhausted. To be the object of Amanda’s gaze is simultaneously terrifying and wonderful; at least one knows that one has her attention – that she is not amusing herself with other things in the midst of conversation.

Amanda loves to give gifts; and for one so sentimentally-minded as I, this quality magnifies her allure a thousand fold – for she gives gifts as if she might go to the grave at any hour, and could not bear to leave one without a token by which her memory might be preserved. Her first gift to me was a page out of a dictionary, on which were listed such words as “virgin”, “virtuous”, and “virulent”. I wrote her name and the date on which it was given on the

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upper right corner, over the word “violation”, and pinned it to the bulletin board over my typewriter.

Her second gift was a small quartz stone, pink in hue, and bearing a wondrous array of variously-sized crystal projections. This came in a little brown sack, which was placed in a padded, silver-colored cardboard box, which was taken out of a pastel-printed paper gift bag, which she carried about with her for hours, until immediately before she went on her way. Upon coming home with the gift (which I had not yet opened), I smoked a cigarette slowly and turned it over and over in my hand, allowing the sun to catch each crystal, and pondering to myself how many millions and millions of years it took for the crystalline formation to reach even that tiny size. In a way, Amanda had given me an idea of eternity, as if to say: “Before another rock like this shall form, you and I will be dust, cast to the furthest reaches of the universe, and the Earth, if it survives, will be a barren pebble winding its way slowly into the black heart of a collapsing sun. So be it: I love you now, and I shall for as long as I care to foresee.”

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Indeed, she asked me if I was in love, and I was too in too great a conflict with myself to answer her directly. I am still waiting for passion to answer these questions that my intellect forbids me from considering. God, let Tuesday mark the end of our indecision!

"I'm Never Satisfied" - 03.16.06

My cigarette burning close to my fingertips, with rain falling about my shoulders, my thoughts went, of course, to you, dear girl. And it's insipid, but I've begun to understand why men fall in love. Yes, it's insipid, child, the way men fall in love.

What this is, you really ought to know, is greed. What you are is prey that has wandered too near to my den. What I am is hungry – always hungry. And it's been ages since I fed; perhaps only days, but it feels like ages, for I'm never satisfied.

These bones I crawl and sprawl among: would you call them trophies? I know them to be torments. No, I'm never, ever satisfied.

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But I will be satisfied, I promise, promise, promise! I will be satisfied with you!

"A Sinner" - 03.16.06

I have spoken frequently, with my closest familiars, about feeling myself to be on the verge of a breaking point – a pivot from which the remainder of my existence would either launch into a state of splendor, or collapse into the most irrecoverable of calamities. Tuesday night was that breaking point, and the result, I fear, was the latter of the two.

It is known of me that I am always in love, and if I am not wholly ruled by my passions, it must at least be admitted that I am hardly a competent ruler over them. But when I think of where my passions have led me – not only in the last week, but for years on end – I know for certain that I will never again find any love for myself. And deploring myself as I do, I will most assuredly never again be worthy of any lover; not even the most ghastly and self-debasing would take me.

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I have, at last, begun to identify myself – entirely and in every part – a sinner. Where once I thought myself to be a mainly pious soul, mindful of my boundaries, with only the occasional weave or falter for which to repent, now I look behind me and see that the boundary has been crossed, and my place on the side of the Good has been forfeited permanently. I think that I am truly lost; that my sins have become me, and that all I do from this point onward will constitute a sin, however I may vainly hope to construe it. Among men I am a vermin, and under God, I am a stranger in perpetual exile.

For those who would take account of my sins, these are the things that I am:

A liar.

A flatterer.

An adulterer.

A lecher.

A seducer.

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These aspects have overcome me completely; I am utterly subject to their rule and authority – they are the fiends to whom I pay impartial and absolute loyalty.

From here forward, I shall have no peace. . . .

"Filth" - 03.21.06

I received a little note from Amanda yesterday, in which she said that she would be coming back that evening. Her grandmother died last week, you see, obliging her to travel to a variety of family proceedings. And this week is Spring Break. And it was starting to seem like I'd never see her again. You understand, then, how wonderful it was to find her note – simple and brief though it may have been.

I've begun to wonder whether I have the time to be in love – or in any case, to be languishing in that peculiar phase of love in which fear and awe is subdued by tenderness and yearning, achingly sweet such as it is. Oh, Sweetness; I am aching. My thoughts are scattered like the fragments of a puzzle across the floor, and drunk as I am, I

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labor to pick them up, only to fall down, laughing madly and searching the peripheral haze for your face. Bury me in filth, darling – keep me infected. If I ever recover from this ailment, I swear, I'll die instantly. I'll kill myself without a thought.

Volume III [*Fascinating Creature*] is finished. I'll be manufacturing copies for my acquaintances, and shall, I hope, have it available in the “shop” within a matter of weeks.

An interesting note: I went with Rachel to the city the day before yesterday, and spent the whole of the bus trip home endeavoring to convince her that life is worth living. Anyone who has ever only briefly met Rachel, or only briefly met me, will find this scenario so unlikely and fantastic as to be hilarious.

"A Letter to Amanda" - 03.28.06

My Dear Amanda,

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I've been reading your letter over and over, and I am sure that you would think it despicable how beautiful I find it to be. All of the emotions that I search and scavenge for in myself, you bring up with ease, and you pour them across the page as one would throw water from a washbasin into the gutter. Your sorrows, which are so common and repulsive to you, inform me better than any book, and move me more than any song. And from my position – from my little burrow in the black and insulating earth – you are a song, sung by accident and following a melody drifting on old and well-traveled winds.

I don't mean to be obscure, but if I were to advise you, I would advise you thus: that we must learn to tell the ocean from the waves. And this being said, we must learn to forget the ocean and greet the waves, knowing that they will crush us, and that once they have, we will be in all parts given to the ocean, and no longer subject to the crashing and the churning of the waves.

My darling, I don't know if I am of any benefit to you. Neither can I say whether I present you with any

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definite harm. I meet you as a man-at-arms who, having already been felled by the first slew of arrows, now waits to be trampled beneath the advancing horde. Between the senseless suffering of life, and the imponderable horror of obliteration, I find you, and in you I find comfort. But salvation? I don't ask the impossible.

What I want, more than joy, more than life, more than anything, is to bring you to safety. The ground beneath us is trembling and cracking, the sky is bleeding poison and soot, and yet we cling to each other – each one measuring the terror in the other's eyes – and we dream – wildly – of permanence, of certainty, of peace. We are abandoned to our sins and the apocalypse they bought us. What could be more satisfying? This IS our suicide – and it could go on for years.

When I was younger, I found a remedy for the nausea I felt at looking into the mirror by breaking the mirror. After that, no matter how I looked at myself, some part was always missing, and some part was always askew. I could view myself realistically on a piecemeal basis, but

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when I drew back and tried to see myself as a whole, what I saw instead was fragmented, distorted, hopelessly incomplete. And finally, the mirror spoke truth. It saw me as I should have seen myself, and as no other person had the attention or the courage to see me. For the world is nothing if not a massive infirmary. We roll ourselves painfully out of our cots, we drag ourselves, wincing and groaning through the rows and rows of beds around us, and we go asking, "Where is my nurse? Has anyone seen my doctor? Please, I'm in pain!" And we receive only moans, death-rasps, and curses in reply. If we are lucky, we arrive at the realization that everyone is in pain, and that nobody has seen the doctor, nobody has seen the nurse. The best among us bear our own wounds with dignity, and try to comfort those around us, who are in a state to be comforted. But it is only comfort we can expect, Amanda, and only comfort we can give. Never a cure. Never absolute healing. We woke up broken, and we shall fall asleep still broken.

Perhaps we can learn this together. The true mystery of life is not why it is so meaningless and disordered, but

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why, when meaning and order are demonstrated to us so abundantly, we find ourselves impelled to act against it. Pain, in nature, is nothing more than a warning: an indication of danger, of imbalance, of disorder. We feel it, and, one would suppose, we jerk away. But there is no pain, really, that can compare to the pain inherent in love. There is no foolishness comparable to that by which we sew our hearts to the hearts of others, knowing – as experience has taught us – that we will inevitably be torn, if not by mere frailty, then at last, by death. At the center of this we find the most invidious of fallacies: feeling our own incompleteness, we wonder if, by combining our own fragments with the fragments of another, we might attain wholeness. We continuously allow ourselves to forget that, implicit to the ordeal of joining ourselves to others, is the incontrovertible anguish of becoming eventually separated from them. Would we not be happier if we spared ourselves this act of denial? Would we not be wiser to build our fires knowing that they may someday scorch us, that they may someday be extinguished, that we may someday be forced to build another?

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At the extremity of age, at the dusk of life and the dawn of wisdom, we may at last realize that we were never anything but alone; that at our last breath, we are touching no one and no one is touching us. We are astonished, sometimes, to learn that for all our commiseration and sympathetic efforts, we have spent our decades oblivious, and that we have never truly succeeded in sharing our pain with another. We have always been alone with our suffering, and helpless to relieve the suffering of those we have loved. And though we all use the same words to describe our suffering, in the end, we find ourselves saying – and believing – that no one has suffered as we have. And indeed, no one has. For while we pass through the universe, and the universe passes through us, and all things are passing, and we are passing away – what have we possessed other than our suffering? Nothing was ours but the trials and agonies we passed through alone, while the pale-countenanced chimera of Love harassed us with her games and riddles.

Thus do I return to the beauty of what you have written. You say that you want somebody to love, and

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somebody that will love you. It's yours, Amanda – but not as you would have it – and certainly not as I would give it to you. But roll your cot close to mine, darling – share with me a little gauze, a little salve, a little whiskey, a touch of courage, perhaps. I won't ask too much because I know how painful it is to move, to extend your arm, to breathe.

The luckiest of us get what we all really wanted, beneath all the groaning, the weeping, the complaining and grieving: namely, to die in a different room than the one we were born in. Ultimately, we're all in the same proverbial boat, looking out at the same ocean, and asking the same questions about what lies beyond the horizon. Nothing changes except where we're standing; the destination is the same for all of us.

I'd tell you to enjoy the ride, but that's not really the point. Neither is languishing below deck, waiting for the world to stop rocking back and forth. And I very much doubt that jumping overboard will help anything. When all is said and done, our fellow passengers are just going to toss us overboard anyway, and forget us soon after our

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carcasses hit the water. All I can tell you is that there are periods of sickness and periods of health, periods of calm and periods of tempest, periods of sun and periods of darkness. To expect that you will find anything permanent in this world is to assume that the world itself is something permanent, and we know that it is not. No one can stop the sun setting. We can find happiness together, Amanda, from moment-to-moment, as it avails itself to us. You can find happiness with someone else, too; I would be wise not to trouble myself with such depressing realities. But remember that we are both sad and we are both alone and we are both suffering, although my suffering and your suffering are particular to us, and can never be conferred, combined, or used to cancel each other.

I know you're broken; I can see it in the way you reflect me. I'm broken when I look at you. My love of you is my love of Truth, and Truth itself is broken. It is my recommendation, made out of devotion, that you look at it one piece at a time. And if it cuts you, bring your wound to me, and – since the doctors and nurses have all been called

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away – I'll dress it to my own mediocre ability. And I'll comfort you – insofar as you are able to be comforted.

I love you. I'll talk to you tomorrow.
-Damien

"The Clandestine Excursion" - 03.28.06

Amanda was waiting for me, where we had specified, in the far back of the upper floor of the library – sitting in the only chair, which was green. She had bought a new camera with this week's grocery money; she held it in her lap and ran her fingers over the gears and switches and buttons by which the camera was made to operate. I sat down next to her. She asked me if I minded sitting on the floor; I answered that I preferred it.

"I have my car today," she said. She was referring to her aunt's car, which she was driving without a license while her aunt was vacationing in Wales.

"We should go somewhere," I responded.

"I don't have very much gas," she said.

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I said, “We don’t have to go far.”

“OK. Where should we go?”

“I don’t know.”

She showed me her new camera. It looked fairly high-grade; not drug-store fair, in any case. “I should take some pictures of you,” she said; then she stood up and moved over to my left, putting the camera up to her eye.

At that moment, Wes walked up, through the bookshelves, wearing black. West is homosexual; he dreams of becoming a woman someday, and he’s made elaborate plans.

“Hey there, Wes,” I called, “Come over here and give me a kiss for the camera.”

“Why?” Wes asked.

“So I can have a picture of us kissing, obviously,” I said.

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“No,” he said tentatively. He and Amanda exchanged stand-offish looks.

“So what are you doing here in the library?” I asked him.

“Working,” He replied, as if I should have known that already.

“You work here?” I exclaimed, “With the books? What do you know about books?”

“I know how to organize them,” he said, “And I know how to read, if I get bored.”

Amanda addressed Wes abruptly: “But what exactly are you doing here, right now?”

“I don’t know,” Wes replied, surprised.

“Then maybe you should go find out,” said Amanda. Wes looked at me. I looked at Amanda, and then back at Wes, smiling feebly and unsure of my course.

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“Is that a not-so-polite way of telling me to go away?” He asked in a voice weakened by shock.

“Yeah, maybe,” said Amanda, lifting the camera to her eye again.

West turned around and disappeared into the bookshelves again. Nonplussed, I called after him laughingly: “I guess she wants us to be alone.” He didn’t answer. “That was strange,” I said to Amanda, my voice betraying my embarrassment.

“I don’t want your hair in your eyes,” she said. I brushed my bangs back so that they came to rest against my cheekbone, and she snapped a picture. Then she walked around so that she and I were facing. I was crouched with my back to the wall, my legs pulled up to the level of my chin, and my hands pressed between them. I looked into the distance, past Amanda, and she took another shot. She checked the film counter on the camera and went back to sit in the green chair.

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We went to her car, which was piled high with several brands of empty cigarette packs. “Those couldn’t be yours,” I said. Her father died almost exactly a year ago, of lung cancer.

“They’re my aunt’s,” she said, “She’s too lazy to throw the fucking things away.”

“Sounds like a real neat-freak,” I said, scanning the heaps of debris that completely obscured the back seat.

She asked me again where I thought we should go.

“I’m completely under your command,” I said, “I know you like it that way.”

Amanda smiled. “Sometimes,” she said.

Amanda took me to Rosendale, where she pulled into an unpaved circular lot, in which trailers were parked bearing large silver tanks. They appeared to contain gas of some kind, but they were unmarked as far as I could discern.

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“I’ve been wanting to take photos here for, like, three months,” Amanda said as we got out of the car. We walked down a little driveway that descended into a kind of hollow, in which a small, box-like building was overshadowed by looming crags and blown-out rock faces. Plastic tubing, scraps of wood, and orange hard hats were strewn in piles against the foot of the slope. A rickety-looking system of fat pipes crawled around the rocks, shooting up over the cliff and vanishing into the forest, perhaps two hundred feet above us.

“I’d like to go up there,” I said, peering up at a likely-looking stone pier, about half-way up the cliff.

“Go ahead,” said Amanda, sitting down to wind the film in her camera, “I’ll take some shots of you when you reach the ledge.”

I bounded off to a tapering section of the hollow, where dirt and foliage would provide me with the traction needed to make my way up. Wearing a pink sports jacket and a red silk tie, I felt like a bit of a fool, dragging myself

up by grasping bending sprigs and mossy protrusions of stone. Branches grabbed my black felt fedora from my head; finally I took it off and held it in my hand, struggling forward with the other.

At the top of the ridge, I found myself looking down at the road from which we had come – a thin, meandering black strip with tiny toy cars winding to and fro on it. The cliff fell vertically on the other side, with just enough room for me to stand without tumbling downward in either direction. I held my arms out for balance and hurried over to the side of the peak I was hoping to access. I was still on a continuous incline; the ridge we had perceived from the ground was not the actual top. I had to continue upward into the forest while the road shrank to the width of a thread beneath me.

I finally reached the plateau and was able to make my way around to where I could see the little building, and farther off, Amanda's blue car and the silver tanks. Everything was miniscule to my eyes. I realized that there was no way I could make my way down to the place where

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I had intended to stand; it lay midway down the cliff-face, which was perfectly vertical and flat as a copper coin. So I continued around, hoping to come back down on the opposite side from where I had come up.

I circled to where I could now see the other side of the building. The slope seemed to soften somewhat on its way down into the hollow. It wasn't clear whether there was another solid drop between the ground and me yet, but I figured I could at least get down far enough to catch sight of Amanda, who was probably starting to worry.

My feet hit the slope and I immediately began to slide, carried on a tumbling wave of dirt and gravel. I stuffed my hat back on my head and reached out for anything I could grab to slow my descent. The flesh on the palms of my hands opened against the bark of passing trees; my shoes became filled with stones as the earth flared up around my soles. At last I was able to stop myself by colliding with a moss-thick boulder. Behind this, the way down proved kinder, but it was still impossible not to slide. When I reached a point where I could actually choose my

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own steps, I looked down at my left hand and saw that I was no longer wearing my wedding ring.

I stopped where I was and looked around me in every direction, then, growing panicked, I started picking my way back up the slope, following the naked grooves that had been made by my feet as I had been careening downward. I wondered how I might explain this to my wife, and I thought how ironic it was that I would lose my wedding ring while on a clandestine outing with Amanda, of whom Dot is already suspicious.

It seemed a miracle when I actually found the little fleur-de-lis shaped band of silver-plated pewter, half-buried in one of my deep, sliding footprints. My heart did cartwheels as I returned the ring to my finger and continued downward again, to meet Amanda, who had been wandering along the rim of the hollow, fearing the worst.

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Following this adventure, we visited two graveyards – one Protestant and the other Catholic. In the Protestant graveyard, I took a picture of her seated atop a large granite tombstone with an etching of deer by a brook on its polished face. Luckily, her dangling, red canvas sneakers obscured the sub-inscription: “Born in the USA and Proud of It.” We laughed, wondering who would be unsophisticated enough to have that on their tombstone. Then we laughed again to find that the husband and wife buried there were named Fred and Wilma respectively, the names of television's Flintstones – the modern stone-age family.

There were two other graves there, at the extreme back of the yard, which struck us as being singularly tragic in appearance. One bore a plaque with the name of a funeral home, and atop this, a photograph of a somewhat vicious-looking young man, mustached, with his shirt off. Around this was a heart-shaped wreath of artificial flowers. The man had died only three months ago, and the plot was still extremely fresh, and quite supple beneath our feet.

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Directly to the left of this was an even sadder specimen: this grave also seemed brand new. It bore no gravestone and no inscription of any kind; no indication at all of who was buried there. Only a Styrofoam heart bearing a façade of false flowers, which was pegged into the earth, over another bed of plastic flowers which was strewn over the hump of the grave.

In the Catholic graveyard, Amanda asked me to walk around and look natural, without posing, so she could take pictures of me. It was late afternoon and the day had grown quite warm. I took off my jacket and began rolling up my shirt-sleeves. Spotting a little white statuette of Mary atop a dual-headed gravestone, I hung my jacket about the stone Madonna's shoulders, as if she were in need of warmth. Then I took off my hat and set it atop her bowed, white head. She looked perfectly ridiculous there, dwarfed by my hat and coat, with her little marble hands clasped reverently before her. Amanda came up to me, laughing wildly, and snapped a picture. I did the same thing with a figure of Jesus that stood close by, which amused her even more, and on which she spent three frames at least.

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"Kindly Refrain from Existing" - 03.31.06

Amanda –

This book you gave me to read was obviously stolen; the library card in the back carries a due date of two years ago. But I'm enjoying it, and I'm enjoying the knowledge that you have enjoyed it, and I believe there is a small chance that, as I read, I may come to know you better. Which is why I may not read any further: because nothing sickens and terrifies me more than the idea of learning more about you. Because I am sickened and terrified by what I already know.

Why, Amanda, did you bother to tell me where you have been spending your nights? I know that you're lonely, and I know that I am far from you – far from you in many ways – but why would you have told me this, when silence would have been better?

What disturbs me about life, and about friends, is the grotesque amount of time that my friends spend living their lives without me, and the contemptible reality that,

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although I am not with them, they are nevertheless as alive as they would be if I were. And those things that I love, those beauties, those charms – these are still present within them, and are being squandered upon others who cannot – positively cannot – take such pleasure in them as I take. Wherever you go, you are a pleasure – a seeker of pleasure, a taker of pleasure. And the preponderance of these pleasures you find – and have always found – without me and without any need of me.

I would like to request, for the peace of my mind and the gratification of my heart, that you would kindly refrain from existing outside of my company. I will be much relieved, dear friend, to know that after we have parted, until we are reunited, you have not been living at all: rather that you have been held in suspension, sleeping dreamlessly and awaiting nothing other than to be awakened by the conjuration of my will.

For I am greatly grieved by my incapacity to inhabit any will or any consciousness other than my own. If this were not so, I could possess you – even as I possess myself.

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I could guide your movements as I guide my own and hold your heart in concealment from all others.

We are all mysteries, and no mystery can solve another. Our greatest secrets are those which we never make an effort to hide. And I will never be the love of your life, because your lives, like mine, are multiple, and each one has its own love. Love and friendship – birth and death. We are older than the stars, which have only one inception, and suffer only one demise.

"I don't exist when you can't see me/ I don't exist when you're not here/ What the eye don't see can't break the heart/ You can make believe when we're apart/ But when you leave, I disappear." -The Sisters of Mercy

"Amanda and Lorelei" - 04.05.06

I am, for some reason, particularly interested in Lorelei's nose. Its shape pleases me on a tactile level, and often, as my face hangs above hers in the moments after a kiss, I will trace the bridge of her nose with my fingertip, drawing from her a curious stare. Her skin is exquisitely soft – its

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aroma irresistible; she bears her throat to the approach of my lips, and my imagination courses with macabre visions of a melodramatic and sensuous double suicide. I would rather die than lose her; I would rather she die than be lost to me.

I abandoned Amanda unapologetically yesterday. We had met in the customary spot – the uppermost level of the library – and, as she had taken her aunt's car to school again, I implored her to take me off campus. My reason for doing so was that I had encountered Lorelei while leaving my final class of the day, and as she seemed in low spirits, I was reluctant to leave her and keep my engagement with Amanda. But Lorelei insisted that I did not alter my plans nor offend a friend on her account, and I left her at the library doors, smoking a cigarette, of course.

Thus were my thoughts still consumed with Lorelei as I jogged up the stairs and found Amanda waiting for me, leaning forward against the banister and wearing the most oblique of smiles. I all but dragged her in the direction of her car – telling her that I was desperate to get off campus

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grounds, but providing her with nothing resembling an explanation. It is not Amanda's nature to be corralled, however, and she took pleasure in torturing me with dalliances and delays. When we were finally in her car, she merely drove in several circles around the campus, then pulled into a parking spot behind the Hardenburgh building, stating her intention to pluck a yellow lily from a newly planted bed by the rear entrance.

My anxiousness was by now very plain to her, and she asked me again what was causing it. Too flustered to invent any kind of ruse, I told her that if I remained on campus, I would be driven to insanity by my desire to find Lorelei again and discover the source of her distress. Looking down at her drooping little flower, Amanda replied that I was welcome to go in search of Lorelei, if that was what I wanted. We went inside; I wrestled with myself a moment, then burst away in the direction of the library, leaving Amanda where she stood.

As I neared my destination, I turned about and saw Amanda trailing some twelve paces behind me, still

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clutching her decidedly forlorn-looking lily. I went and gave her my arm, and we continued forward together, saying nothing. The next few minutes we had together, she would be the saddest and most beautiful I had ever seen her.

Upon reaching the library, I went directly to Bill, the amiable clerk, and asked him if he had caught sight of a tall girl in a long, black coat. Before he could utter a response, Amanda tugged on my sleeve and pointed out the doors. “There she is,” she said.

Lorelei swept in with her eyes cast to her feet, taking account of no one. I started toward her, but remembered Amanda, who suddenly appeared to have shrunk far into herself.

“I’m going home,” she said, her eyes following Lorelei.

I took Amanda in my arms and gave her a long kiss on the brow. She turned and went out silently – a child, it seemed, in her enormous wool cardigan and her explosion of tangled brown hair.

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I brought Lorelei upstairs, to the secluded corner where Amanda and I used to meet, and when we had spoken for some time, we escaped together into a balmy haven of kisses.

PART IV:

SEPARATION-ERA FRAGMENTS (2007-2008)

A SELF-SUMMARY.

For all the deliberateness with which I have assailed the foundations of my own existence, I have yet been left dazed and wounded by its toppling. The most heartbreaking photograph I've ever seen was a charred little baby crying woefully for its mother, alone in a heap of bombed-out rubble. That it reminded me a little of myself

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is profoundly pathetic. If the baby held a detonator in its clenched little hand, the resemblance would be truer.

I was one of those revolutionaries that swallowed all my cyanide on the assumption that I'd be captured, got hooked on the taste of martyrdom, and joined the other side for the romance of looking in and counting the rounds as they knocked down my blindfolded friends. I learned to smile when they called me the "good spy." It was a twitch, really, more than a smile. It still hits me like epilepsy every time I put the telephone down.

I'm fully domesticated, indoctrinated, and reformed. I've taken everything back. I go running after balls that were never actually thrown. I'll pull the pin on my hand grenade then close my eyes and let you do the counting.

I'm a treasury of hyperbolic metaphor.

AN INITIATE (October 14, 2007)

It's very strange to ponder now. Awakened by the telephone, perhaps not perfectly in command of my

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sensibilities, I seem to have promised that I would show somebody into the woods, and help her find a demon to worship.

“No, no, this will work perfectly,” I mumbled, broadly scratching my bare chest beneath the covers. “You’re still a virgin, right?”

Standing at a payphone somewhere, shrinking from the glances of neighbors, she answered affirmatively, and the line crackled.

“Oh God, and you’re Jewish too! Perfect! Perfect!” I didn’t really know what I was saying. I thought back over the enormous books I used to read as a teenager, and was boggled by a profusion of half-resurrected details. “Anyway,” I conceded, “However perfect you might be as a candidate, we’re still going to have to take all sorts of shortcuts. I mean, this will be a pretty rugged undertaking.”

She said that was all right with her.

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“The hardest part will be getting the demon to come,” I continued, “Once we have one, it’ll be largely a game of mutual exploitation and trickery. We’ll have some sort of degrading obeisance to perform. We’ll have to keep him in check with our blasting rod, which will probably have to be some harmless sprig we pick up on the way there. There’s the contract of course – the wax, the finger-prick, all of that. It’s all a lot of cheap ritual held over from the 16th Century.”

Oh, she said.

I asked her, “Do you know what you want from the demon?”

Oh, no, she said. She hadn’t thought of it. Did she have to want something specific?

“Well,” I said, “It’s good to have some kind of demand to start with – something for which your – well, your soul, I suppose – is being exchanged. Something more or less material. Hell is an old-fashioned place... it works on a bartering system – goods for services, services for

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goods. Without an initial transaction to establish expectations, the lines of authority are likely to get horribly construed, and the demon will turn to acts of random mischief just to keep himself occupied. You don't want that, believe me."

She believed me, she said.

I gave her an example. "When I conjured my first demon," I recounted, "I made him promise that I would become a flash-in-the-pan, one-hit-wonder rock star. I didn't want to ask for too much. Just the world on my plate for two or three years, and the chance to die young and semi-glamorously, preferably in a hotel room."

Oh? She said.

I could read her thoughts. "Well, all right, so it never turned out that way. But I never set a time-table for the demon either: that was my mistake. I should have said, 'And I want it to happen by the year 2004,' or something. For all I know, the demon is just waiting around until he can wreak the maximum possible level of destruction –

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really milk the bargain for all it's worth. I was just a lonely kid when I conjured him. The longer I live, the more relationships I form; the more relationships I form, the more people I drag down with me, and the more bitterness and despair I engender through my self-ruination. Bitterness and despair, that's their bread and butter down there."

She'd have to think about that, she said.

I yawned, "Take your time."

A DEATH SCENE (Undated)

We've all gone to our separate places, to brood and calculate our ruin. One goes to the roof, to suffer in the wind, wearing a borrowed hat. The other goes to the kitchen, to her electric typewriter, where she pounds her life to pieces and leaves black scabs on the back of a limp, white sheet. I go to the bathroom and pretend to electrocute myself with a hairdryer, in the bath. Nobody's fooled. It's the third or fourth death scene today, if the simulated murder is counted.

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“Begging to die by the hand of a friend!” I rasp, a hand on her throat, a hand on her cold cheek. She bends like a lily beneath me. “He made you his lover and I never knew! ‘Till I learned from the lips of innocent envy! Learned! From the lips! Of! Innocent! Envy!”

“What – what are you...” she stutters.

“It is written!” I hiss, “It has been *sung!*”

“Oh... oh yes... yes...” Now she is remembering.

“This would all make sense, if only you had been paying attention,” I chide. I swing her around and throw her at the feet of her friend. “Kill her!” I howl, “Can’t you see she’s in the way?”

“In the way?” murmurs her friend, “Is she between us?”

Both of them are shivering, their eyes bulging. I have a cigarette between my fingers, and its ashes are falling on my petrified companion’s upturned collar.

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“That,” I say, “Is the *bloody* New York School!”

Laughter. Relief. I throw my cigarette away.

A HYMN TO HERMES (Undated)

Darling, you are the accident of genius.

Secret of the earth, a jewel formed in darkness;

Your elements in sacerdotal tones, I sing –

“Child! shall I be your fool?

I know that you are born of gods,

And that you are but running backwards.”

THE GOSPEL (November 16, 2007)

The gospel of our times is by necessity vulgar and expeditious. Since words have brought no effect, we have resorted instead to embraces. Life is a plague – desire a virulence. With a kiss we prove that the fire cannot quench itself. We consummate our courtship on a bed of dry

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kindling; our wedding guests rake out our bones and dress themselves in our ashes.

The gospel of our times is rash and calamitous. The new way to the Kingdom is a short cut through the flesh. Since the Word has brought no effect, we have exchanged our prayers for embraces. You will not have been led and I will not have been followed when, laughing and young-limbed, we awaken to Summerland – and, finally, love.

SOMETHING TRANSITORY (November 19, 2007)

I was reeling drunk at a house in Mt. Tremper, in the middle of the forest, where something transitory was being celebrated. S.M. wanted me to show her how I had climbed a tree to get up onto the porch. I had sacrificed much of my senses to a bottle labeled *Kentucky Gentleman*, which, despite its name, had given me some fairly rough treatment. “I’m very drunk,” I told S.M., “I’ll probably fall.”

“Show me anyway,” she said, and she followed me outside, where we could watch our breath tumbling from our nostrils. S.M. is the sort of girl who can flash you two

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middle fingers and not lose an ounce of her puerile innocence. She had said flattering things about my face, and I owed her something for it.

I got around the back of the house, S.M. running behind me, and I never lost my footing, though through my wetted eyes the world looked like a carousel as viewed through a broken kaleidoscope. Before I could climb the tree again, though, the owner of the house came out and entreated me not to. The tree was special to him, he said, pointing out how he had built the porch specially so as to not interfere with its growing. He called it a Sour Gum tree and made a eulogy to its foliage.

So we were standing out behind the house, S.M. and I, with our arms folded, and our shoulders hunched around our necks, and our coats somewhere on the floor inside, and I was too drunk to notice time passing by, or to hear what S.M. was saying. (Your peripheral vision goes when you're drunk, so you become a kind of camera, and your body becomes a tripod with one of its legs missing, so it wobbles.) S.M. and I peered up, and there were two figures

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standing up on the porch, back-lit by the party scene, and I could tell that they were N.H. and S.G.. N.H. was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and standing very still, as she always does, not feeling the cold on account of her purported Irishness. S.G. had on her yellow beret.

Some rusty mechanism inside my heart wheezed and gave out just at that moment, and I started to call up to S.G., “S.G., my dear, jump down to me! Jump and I’ll catch you – I’ll soften your fall!”

“What are you doing?” S.M. gasped, taking hold of my arm as if to pull me away somewhere.

“I’m not going to jump, Damien,” returned S.G., “Be quiet.”

“Please, please jump,” I whined, “I swear it will be all right. Give me your trust and I’ll suspend gravity for your sake. We’re growing old and dying while you tarry in your non-belief!”

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“Fuck you!” S.G. shouted, her voice cracking against the cold. “Fuck you, Damien! You’re always doing this to me!”

“Getting drunk?” I said.

“Telling me to jump! Telling me to kill myself with you or for you or whatever it is! You can’t do the impossible,” S.G. cried, “You’re a fraud, Damien! You’re such a God-damned fraud!”

“No, no I’m not,” I sputtered, weaving backwards into S.M. “I’m not a fraud. S.M., tell her.”

S.G. screamed, a short wordless utterance, and turned her back to me, and went inside, her last breath hanging somewhere above me in the branches. S.M., inconceivably young and too amazed to speak, held on to my arm as I careened toward the house. I scooped up a bottle of beer on the way in, opened it in a terrifying hurry, drank down half of it, and charged upstairs, to take refuge in a closet with a vacuum cleaner and some shoes, and S.M. hung up somewhere in the crowd.

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My wife found me later in the night, when I was taking hits from a clay pipe with a lawyer and an Englishman. She put me in the car and took me home. I woke up for a moment to ask what time it was, and when she said eight o'clock, I thought she meant in the morning. Jesus Christ, I said. Is it that early?

SINGING AND DYING. (February 23, 2008)

They actually said, "No thank you." The young women at the bar, as I closed my guitar case and put on my hat, and waved copies of *Always Always Ends* in the air, and said "Last call for CD's; they're free," - they actually said, "No thank you." As if I were hawking bubble gum and shoelaces at the doors of a train station.

I had been playing my songs for over an hour. The wife of my nominal opening act (a man whose talents far surpassed my own) was listening rapturously for much of it, standing alone at the foot of the stage, her eyes closed, smiling. A childhood friend sat shadow-bound a few feet away, forming dark plans for later in the evening.

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The rest - there were perhaps eight or ten - remained far across the room, slouching around the bar, conversing in shouts, making amorous transactions, laughing boisterously - screaming now and then. Their racket unsettled L.B., in whose car I had come. She went outside with her scarf wrapped about her head and smoked away a pack of cigarettes.

So I sang between swigs from a bottle of beer, sometimes halting a song in mid-verse to await the end of a particularly obnoxious fit of revelry rising from the front of the house.

I have never written a song for which I have not suffered. There is no difference - for me - between singing and dying.

But when I put on my hat, and closed my guitar case, and offered the young women at the bar all that I had to show for a life blown to atoms, they actually said, "No thank you."

PART V:
CONFESSIONS OF A DISCARDED
HUSBAND

I don't need to remind you that I fell short of your standard of trust from the beginning of our relationship, by omitting my ancient tryst with C-----. However inconsequential and extraneous this seemed to me, it proved very early that first, I was not committed to absolute honesty in our relationship, and second, that I had a tradition of infidelity that began with my first marriage. As would be the case for the next half-decade to come, I wanted to have you think that my moral boundaries were as strict in practice as they were in theory. Like many men, however, my conduct and my motivations were less than principled. I saw the affections of women as a boon that ought never to be dismissed or rejected, whatever the depth of my commitment to another person, and regardless of my actual sense of compunction, which was always strong. I was guided by a guilty ego that demanded

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continuous attention, but despised itself for demanding it, and furthermore, despised everyone who ever extended it. From the beginning, then, I begrudged you for falling into what I regarded as the “snare” of loving me; I believed myself to be unworthy of you, and I resented you for stooping.

I was immediately unnerved by your insistence that we recite for each other our sexual histories, before a sexual relationship between us had even developed. I assumed that you must have had some history and some experience in that regard, but unless there was some danger of my contracting a disease, I knew that I was not emotionally secure enough to confront your past. I was too immersed in the present, and in the bewildering fortune of loving you, and having you love me. It was too soon for me to be thinking about who had loved you – and whom you had loved – in previous ages. When you told me that you had been with four men before me, I left it like that, and pressed you for nothing more. I literally refused to think about it until after we had become lovers, and I began to form an inevitable physical claim over you, and had started

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to wonder whether you thought me to be a satisfactory partner. Even then, a knot formed in my throat when I thought of broaching the topic with you.

My memory is imperfect here, but I am fairly certain that the true turning point did not come until you bizarrely insisted that I read aloud the journal entry you made the day after losing your virginity. That night you released an avalanche of heartbreak in me by which I would be crushed and mangled to a degree that no number of words, and no number of screams, could ever convey. I truly felt as if I had been asked to watch you making love to another man – as some kind of beastly therapy – some diabolically contrived salve against jealousy.

This disastrous instance had three tragic results. First, it assured me that you would never truly belong to me – that others had a claim to you before I did, and that anyone in the world could claim you over me. It left me feeling helpless, impotent, and – frankly – castrated. Second, it caused me to feel that our two levels of sexual experience and sexual attainment were grotesquely unequal

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– that I was still a novice, while you were like the prostitute that Hesse’s Siddhartha courted to teach him the ways of love, condescendingly tolerating my clumsiness and naiveté. It germinated in me the idea that I needed to match your former level of promiscuity before we could be peers – before we could understand each other completely. Thirdly, and most sadly, it aroused in me a desire for revenge. My injury when I opened that diary and read was literal: a hammer’s stroke to the heart that bruised me to the bottom of my being. That night, like on a fledgling bloodsucker’s first night on the prowl, I first acquired a taste for your tears. Though I loved you no less, I wanted desperately to punish you for the festering wound you had opened in my breast – forcing me to relive the agony that accompanied my separation from my first wife, when she immediately invited another man into our bed. I expected you to rescue me from that anguish: not to bring about its grisly, malodorous resurrection.

Hobbled as I was, I was never nearly serious enough about marrying you. I remember feeling as if I was beholden to you for scooping me up, taking me in, paying

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off my debts. I hated being lonely – I felt privileged that you were willing to have me around, but with that feeling came a certain level of disdain. I couldn't imagine that you actually loved or appreciated me, so much as you pitied me and accepted me as a voluntary obligation. You were always volunteering for this and that – always ready to bear up one onerous, enervating responsibility after another. That you worshiped and revered me the way I worshiped and revered you was directly out of the question. I never kidded myself with the idea that I could make you happy. I married you, therefore, with the prescribed expectation – if not the intention – that I would bring you nothing but sorrow and regret for the rest of your life. Somehow, in the twisted bone yard of my dilapidated mind, it was that image of irrepressible misery that defined my conception of romance. In a thousand years, I'll never forgive myself for this – for looking you in the eye, there in the shivering candlelight of the sanctuary – and plotting your unhappiness. Your unhappiness and my failure. If I could, I would go back in time, walk down the aisle, and bash my

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own head in with the base of a sterling silver candelabra, rather than seeing you marry such a despicable wretch.

I felt so terribly different than you. You were as close to me as a sibling, but as inscrutable as a stranger. I looked at you as we took our uneasy repose at the vegetarian bed & breakfast, as we blundered grimly through the frigid streets of Provincetown, as we yawned through four hours of Samuel Beckett performed at half his usual tempo, and as you stood in the middle of the road afterward, screaming your hatred of me into the headlights. I looked at you and wondered who on earth you were, and who on earth I thought I was. You were just out of college – still your raging and disquieted father's raging and disquieted daughter. I was an uneducated clod, still suffering from an adolescent preoccupation with watching myself disintegrate in other people's open hands. But in two years, we had yet to spend a single night apart. There is no question that we were in love. We were just too clueless and deluded and self-interested and full of useless torment and remorse to treat each other correctly, or to view the marriage in its proper light.

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Having been married before, I should have known that marriage is not only perfect setting for the creation of new life, but it is – suitably – a metaphor for new life. It's ridiculous to think that, at the point of ascending to the altar, one is made a virgin again – that one is wiped clean of former stain and folly, and made over for the perfection of a higher cause and a higher vision. Ridiculous, perhaps – but necessary, and right. My sin is that I carried my chains with me to the red doors of the church. My sin is that I refused to pronounce you perfect as I took the ring from your right hand and placed it on your left. The instant you became my wife, I ought to have recognized you as flawless and new. Instead, I married you with a smirk, as if we were two drunkards carousing in an alleyway, conjuring a game for ourselves, with ash cans for witnesses and a streetlamp for a preacher. Neither of us, I do not think, was sufficiently apprised of the degree to which a husband and a wife must renounce their individuality for the love of the other, and for the love of the fragile New Being that they have become together. True self-sacrifice does not begin at the side of the cradle, but at the steps of the altar. That is

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where my manhood began. I should have risen to it. That is where your womanhood began. I should have protected it.

So I began my real life with you as weary and as sickened by myself as I was when we embarked upon its gritty and tempestuous prelude. I was afflicted by the idea that the hump on my back would have to be sanded down over time, with pressure and friction and an immoderate level of agony. I thought it would kill me to stand up straight and start resembling the man that my beautiful child and my beautiful heart's companion were already straining so hard to see. I gave myself an unlimited measure of extra runway – plenty of time to be a coward and a child and a cad for as long as I wanted. I bragged day and night about how I had never gone to school, never had a boyhood, never experienced the wayward and dissipated youth that you and everyone else looked back on with smiles and cringes. But my bragging was the bawling of an infant. The man you married was nothing but a scabby-kneed schoolboy, moping friendlessly by the crooked seesaw, hoping for some generous soul to kick a ball his way, while letting the ball he had roll unattended into the briars.

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It is the mark of spoiled little monsters that they are never satisfied with the love that they are given.

Our house must have been haunted, because I was a monster, and you were a phantasm. I sat awaiting you at your appointed hours, fixated on some dark spot at the center of my own knotted brow, still obsessed with you, still faithful to you – but never seeing you as you were, or as you should have been seen since becoming my wife. You remained, to me, transparent – and through the gauzy wisps of your lilting outline, I saw your four former lovers – demonically transfigured like mountain dragons in some Taoist underworld. My hands passed through you. Instead of kissing you, I kissed the memory of you kissing them. Here I can only remonstrate with myself up to a limit: I truly strove to battle these fabrications of my unhitched jealousy. I am not so very much wiser now than I was then. I wanted to love you completely, and prayed every day that I could, even as I do today. What I lacked was the will to humbly seek tranquility in the face of the inalterable. Somehow the simplicity of the solution escaped me – to love you for the present and devote myself to your future,

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rather than standing in a self-summoned maelstrom of your incomprehensible past, beating myself lifeless in an effort to stop hating it.

When I met you, you were 21 years old and more than a year out of college. How you ever became enamored of such a preposterous little Philistine, I may never grasp. This aside, I was 21 years old myself before – due entirely to your encouragements – I finally managed to claw my way out of the depressive pit of working-class ennui that I fell into with my first wife (if not before) and embark upon a clownish simulacrum of a college career. I felt like such a fool: the husband of a valedictorian and an early graduate, taking rudimentary algebra courses, surrounded by gum-chewing teenagers in Abercrombie t-shirts. The feat of will you must have mustered to take me seriously! It took me a semester at least to begin squinting past my own embarrassment. I don't blame you if you never got over yours. Without actually presuming to know your thoughts, I suspect that much of your present exasperation with me is because I am, four years later, still in college – still a whisper off from getting the degree that you've had since

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long before we met. These intervening years must have been all but unendurable for you: tethered to such a wastrel while attending birthday parties in the finest houses in Dutchess County. You have probably come to associate the thought of me with squalor and poverty and hunger and degradation.

But here in the last paragraph I have demonstrated clearly that which – above all else – you take the most exception to in me. Namely, my hopelessness. The first thing you knew of me, when you had known me for half-an-hour only, was my hopelessness. Though you saw that I was amiable and jocular in society, there was no mistaking that I carried a terrible, disfiguring burden of unshakable despair – an implacable imp that twisted my reins and wheeled me in the direction of sadness, though the road to happiness lay clear and even ahead of me. While once I had considered this a philosophic mark of distinction, as our lives grew thick and tangled together, I saw how heavily my sadness weighed upon you, and I watched as it reflected in ghastly looks of weariness upon your face, dulling the sheen of your bravest smiles. I tried to turn from it – tried

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to chase it away with shouts and blows – resolving, time after time, that I would be happy – that I would never again let despair darken the posts of our bedroom door. But then, following your movements as you made ready for bed, or as you boiled rice in the kitchen, I would remember how little I knew you – how little I *could* know you – and how little I did and could know myself. And I would think, *This stranger! This most beautiful and unknowable of strangers – what am I to her? What can I possibly be – when I am, to myself, nothing but a plague? When she has made lovers of actors and playwrights and pianists – what can I be to her? What? A husband? Certainly, there's no such thing. If we both wore rings that were as big as our fists and as heavy as boulders, I would not be a husband, nor she a wife. We're strangers – never anything but strangers – and the rancid refuse discarded by our former lovers, mingling obscenely in the fuming heap where we've been tossed. This joke, I would think, has need of a twist, before it may be called humor.*

I went on in this way for three years, withering and softening beneath the castigation and mockery of my own imagination, becoming – within myself – the most snarled and broken of men. Since before we were married, I had

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carried in my wallet a tiny slip of paper, on which I had meticulously printed an oath. The oath prescribed that I would, in the due course of time, be obliged – in the interest of fairness – to secure the affections of no fewer than two other women. A brief tryst with each of these would be sufficient, it said, to make level the disparity between you and me, and banish the ghosts of your own lovers. It was only by these irregular and unsavory means, I had finally assured myself, that I could come to be at peace with you; though I knew that I would never be at peace with myself. I was never at peace with myself before, after all. I wanted to do whatever was required to no longer taste other men's spittle on your kisses, and no longer imagine other men's names on your lips as we joined in our passion. I wanted to see you as mine by choice. Your choice, my choice, both of our choices... without resignation, without question, without doubt or despondency or envy. I wanted us to belong to each other absolutely and resolutely. It only proves the profundity of my inner deterioration that such an obviously paradoxical and inevitably ruinous plan was able to take such persistent root in my consciousness,

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though it repulsed me from the instant I conceived of it. I continued to shrink from any overt flirtations for more than a year after the oath was committed to the slip of parchment. After writing the oath, and preserving it beneath sheaths of transparent tape, I went to a private place and wept convulsively – as one about to mount the gallows.

It is not my intention to convince you that my motivations, when I finally discovered the courage to begin snatching at opportunities for graceless indiscretion, were at all glorious. My base sentiment – at the uttermost rudiment of my contemptible compulsion – was hatred. All of this time, over three winters and more, I had been binding and sopping, re-binding and anointing, binding and sopping and anointing again that foul, brimming wound that had cloven my spirit at the opening of your diary. I was maddened by pain; sickened by heartbreak; gnashing and tearing at myself, at the walls of our home, at the cold and stagnant air that passed between our two mouths. The melancholy that had been with me since childhood had transmuted itself into a white molten stream of fury, which

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followed a seething circuit between my breast and my brain. It had made me, I think, the loneliest man on earth. The separation that I felt from you – my wife – was as high and hard and jagged as an Oriental mountain range. It was not only vengeance that I sought in the feeble and fleeting embraces of one woman, and then another, and then another, during that horrific period. Far beyond this, I missed you. Though we spent our days and nights together, I missed you. I had felt for so long as if I was pursuing the love of an indifferent stranger, that to sample the kisses of a few faint friends seemed – at points – to be as great a relief as a glowing hearth in the dead of winter. But it was all mirage and illusion, just as my ailment and my dilemma and my grievance were mirage and illusion. I might as well have been kissing the skeletal smile of an exhumed corpse, for all the satisfaction and warmth my trifling transactions with the aforementioned provided me.

It shames and grieves me unutterably to say that during this year, I fell as deeply in love with you as I had during the first months of our acquaintance. Again, I would sooner die than be exonerated for my transgressions on

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this account, but my worthless and frankly agonizing attempts to take affection from my haphazard little assemblage of classmates served, one after the other, to prove beyond all question that, in heart, mind, and body, I was still inalterably and irrevocably yours. After each awkward and insipid encounter, I would find myself desperate beyond expression to seek your arms again, where I could find the only real succor, the only real comfort, and the only real peace available to me in the world. But then I would return to you more heartbroken than ever before, ravaged by remorse, and – impossibly – enraged at you for giving me cause to submit myself to such humiliating torments. My love of you caused me to despise all others. Because my despising of you was born of falseness, it was falsely that I tried to love anyone else. Everyone saw this. A woman, I am sure, can sense when she is in the presence of a man who is in love with someone else. Every time, my heart failed, and so did the kiss. When I was with them, all I could think of was you. But when I was with you, all I could think of was your lovers. I soothed myself with visions of suicide.

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Except in the case of Lorelei, who began like the others, but ended by being a true friend, whose all-but unerring devotion to me became the basis for an enduring – if eerily paternalistic – bond, my graduation from the college at Stone Ridge brought my fumbling experiments in physical philandering to a welcome end. I wanted nothing more to do with kisses; nothing more to do with any girl who wanted kisses from me. (I wrote a song at around this time called “Razor Fences”, in which I said, “If ever again anyone tries to kiss me, I swear, I’ll run off on all fours.”) Lorelei – from whom I no longer abided any external expressions of affection – had become a source of continuous consternation and annoyance. Your discovery of our ill-defined relationship the first time around had already decimated your faith in me, and my emotional unsettledness and addiction to Lorelei’s company would shortly shatter your heart again, and again, and again as time lurched painfully forward. Time after time I would prove that I was too great a child to forsake an essentially superficial friendship in the interest of preserving my marriage, my family, and the heart of the woman who

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remained my dearest joy – though I punished and tormented you ceaselessly, mocking your pleas for consideration. My loyalties were the loyalties of a playground ringleader, not of a man with a family to support and a marriage to sustain. I pretended that I was being “true to myself.” But being false to you was the greatest error and the worst wrong of my existence.

I don’t suppose for an instant that my loneliness was unique to me. Our problem was not that I was seeking you, and you remained distant – but that we were seeking each other, and were by own prides and preoccupations repelled. Undoubtedly, there is nothing worse that I could have done to separate us further than carrying on as I did – and would continue to do – with my juvenile intrigues and self-crucifying adulteries. But long before these began, we each had our own obsessions – my songwriting and your directing, which would help to make us lonely for each other, and malignantly assist us in remaining physically and spiritually divided. Often, one’s busyness and preoccupation with his or her particular pursuit made the other angry, so that even when we were together, we were

obliged to shun each other. During the whole of our lives together, before and after my intrigues began, only a few weeks could be counted in which my songs did not divide me from you, nor your theatrical interests from me.

In the all-embracing spirit that habitually attends newfound lovers, we began by helping each other. I, of course, knew you first as an actor (wrongly termed) knowing his director. Though I was of little use in your *King Lear*, I performed as ably as I could, and sought your pleasure on stage as well as off, when we went to our cars and our corners to kiss and exchange silent covenants of love. (And now that I recall how carefully we went about our romance during that time, I am able to understand how nobody knew of your recent romance with D.L. I am not, it seems, the only one of us that is bound to chase his life in circles.) And, having been introduced to my aspirations as a writer and performer in song, you quite eagerly volunteered your capacities as violinist, and joined the band that I had formed with Benjamin and Maryann. We gave of ourselves as each of us could, and it was not until we came to be cohabitants that either of us, I believe, had a

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moment's urge to resent each other for our individual endeavors. But in the course of time, as you charged forth on one frantic directorial crusade after another, and I continued to write song after increasingly baleful song, we were each given cause – in the secrecy of our minds – to wonder whether one love could sustain two divergent creative vocations. We struggled forward and maintained ourselves and our house as well as we could, through all the trials and contortions of a life newly beginning, and found at last a courageous semblance of acceptance for each other's obsessions, though we comprehended and appreciated them less and less. Again and again I would vow to abandon my music and make you and our family my only concern – and you would stay my hand when I lunged to crack my guitar into pieces, sure that I would lose my mind without it. And once or twice, you suggested that you would retire your efforts on behalf of the theatre for the same reason. But inevitably, I would grant you a sullen blessing to undertake another project, and another, and another – sometimes two at a time. We loved each other and acted rightly, except that we allowed our dutiful

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resignation to grow fetid and rank within us, until our eyes flashed with anger every time they met. We were too young to find serenity with ourselves, and each other, and our artistic compulsions. We believed that we could have all that we wanted together without sacrificing a modicum of what we each naively considered to be intrinsic and indispensable to us. Now all of the songs I have written, which I knew would give you offense and cause you pain – what have any of them earned me? The songs are forgotten and my only real love has turned from me, contemptuous of my tearful pleading. *God, how I miss you!*

Tremulously, I continue. It was after your second discovery of my recalcitrant entertainment of Lorelei's attentions, when your heart had all but flown from me completely, and my heart was too laden with guilt to do aught but trudge behind, that – motivated by a spirit of contrition and a pure desire for restitution – I made the mistake that would issue us both into the hands of the Devil. Determined not to allow myself the opportunity to grow lonely again, thence to find myself wishing for Lorelei or some other incidental companion, I took a part in your

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As You Like It – anticipating that, while we worked together on the play, our love could be rekindled, as it first was under Shakespeare’s beneficent providence. I went with you into the show hoping so ardently that I would not disappoint you again. How any man can fail so often and so utterly, and yet be allowed to live, is a black mark against a just universe.

It was stupid of me to go with you to the theatre. After years of feeling unworthy to be your husband, to now submit again to your authority and domination as my director was, to me, a compound humiliation. Knowing that to act as your husband while you were in the midst of directing would undermine the potency of your command in the eyes of the cast, it immediately became clear to me that we must act as near-strangers in the theatre – even as we acted as near strangers in our own home. This was no relief. Nothing was to be corrected this way. Your attention to the rest of the cast left me feeling envious and forgotten, and what little attention you extended to me was, I imagined, diluted by sorrow and tainted by disdain. My

scheme to draw us back together instantly reversed upon itself, and began to propel us even further apart.

And so I became lonelier than ever. Alienated from you, plagued by a deafening swarm of stinging regrets, horrified at being again nothing more than a faceless cast member under your despotic charge, and still – I admit – convalescing from having Lorelei's friendship wrenched away from me, I was utterly vulnerable to the flatteries and diversions provided by the girls that hung bashfully twittering backstage. Their open-hearted acceptance and adoration of me was a cruelly obvious antidote to your rejection and abhorrence. I was still, if I may reemploy the analogy used above, a playground ringleader – haplessly responding to some barbarous compulsion to surround myself with wide-eyed cohorts, who could hardly be expected to immure themselves against my cultivated entrancements. I do not claim or pretend, of course, to be any more charming or persuasive than any other man. My youthful mannerisms helped me to endear myself to the girls, while their knowledge of my age – and, I can only suppose, my marriage to you, their revered director –

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stoked the fires of their curiosity. For my part, my natural interest in the individual allowed me to form a fondness for each of them, according to her own virtues, and to treat her with the same level of respect as I would grant any adult. Thrown together as we were in the common quarters of the theatre, I could scarcely help but regard the girls as friends. They were, to be sure, a livelier and more entertaining lot than the sour-faced and grumbling assortment of workaday citizens that comprised the elder section of the cast. I jealously treasured my time with the girls, trying without success to absorb as much of their reckless jubilation as I could, without attracting the contempt and suspicion of my fellow adults, and without adding to the shame and grief that I had already brought you over the previous year. My intention was to forget myself. But I was your husband, and to forget myself was to forget you.

My familiarity with the young women was an irritation to you while the show was underway, insofar as it distracted us from our performances, and appeared – while we were at the theatre – to distract me from you. I became

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brazen in consorting with the girls, failing to repulse them when they offered me tokens of tenderness which, though innocent, were unbecoming for me to receive as a father and a husband. I had grown so glutted upon their dotage that, when I saw you tipping over the brink of tolerance, I was too dizzy and torpid to catch you, and too self-satisfied to be moved by your admonishments. We thought, the girls and I, that we had found an uncommon kinship. But it was only fascination and vanity. A child will always cleave to the man who allows her to climb in his lap and tug on his beard, and who pretends to be riveted by all of her senseless utterances. I was the favorite uncle; the handsome cousin. My self-estimation, propelled by the vapors of their facile fawning, soared to nauseating heights. The earth shrank beneath me. In an instant, I had lost sight of you. Helpless and wild with frustration, you resorted to your own wiles and subterfuges, peering into all that I wrote (as you had done before, during the Lorelei affair), and petitioning the parents of the girls to bring intervention. Long after the scenery of *As You Like It* had been torn down and taken away, my dissembling and treachery

continued. The girls, who went, one and all, to act alongside you in the show that followed, shied from your gaze – no longer innocent to the injury they were doing you. They wrote to me furiously, and I to them – trying to maintain with words the convivial friendship that we had forged while idling in the wings. But what was created, along with hundreds of pages of surreptitious correspondence, was a world of misery. . . .

(Abandoned March 20, 2008. Never delivered.)

PART VI:

THE CITY: A DIALOGUE

Characters:

Silvanus, a man between thirty and forty.

Perdita, a girl in her late teens.

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Setting:

An urban café

SILVANUS: I can't believe I came all the way here. I've told you how much I hate coming to the city. I've never done it alone before. That must seem pathetic to you.

PERDITA: Yes, but you've always seemed pathetic to me.

SILVANUS: I could have expected you to say that: the most insensitive thing possible. A regular person would have said: Thank you for coming. It did cost me some trouble, if you care to know. You needn't bother saying that you didn't care to know.

PERDITA: I'm sorry. I'm sorry you took the trouble. I hardly remember why I asked you here – why I thought I could expect you to come.

SILVANUS: I know why. It was vanity. You wanted me to see you in person – to see what the city has done to you. And of course you expected me to come. I've never refused you – never missed a date. I'm one of a hundred

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men – and women too, I suspect – who'd do anything for you. I wish I had that power.

PERDITA: Don't you? You did once.

SILVANUS: Of course not. I'm as powerless as I am solitary. I don't keep enough associations to exert power over anyone. What does a person like me want with friends – with influence? It took me too long, cost me too much, realizing how unfit I am for either.

PERDITA: Unfit, or just afraid? That's why I came here: to gain friends and influence, and to get away from you – the power you had over me. You could have done the same thing. You didn't have to retreat from life.

SILVANUS: Neither did you, but in our own way, each of us did. I always knew you'd run away to the city, and I did all I could to discourage it, inevitable though it was. And you knew it was inevitable that I would stay behind – helpless, mute, blessedly ignorable.

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PERDITA: You forget that this is where I come from. I was never a country girl. It was a simple question of life or death. Can you really resent me for wanting to live? But you do resent me. You're withering with jealousy. You wanted me to die there, in the country, with nobody to talk to, and nobody to turn to, but you.

SILVANUS: That's not altogether false and not altogether true. It wasn't for my own sake that I wanted you to stay. I came to love you when you were still only a dear little child – a shy, sweet girl with a worn-out library card. I knew that the city would destroy every trace of her, or that she would destroy every trace of herself to come here. I watched it all happen, just as it was scripted. You're right when you say that the city was within you all along. You would have grown up to be something abhorrent whether you left or stayed. The city is a colony of parasites where cruel people come to feed. Birds of a feather, as they say. You couldn't have resisted it even if you wanted to. It would have taken you back in accordance with your will or against it. But the gods of the city had to have their sacrifice, and she – the modest and good-natured prodigy you once were – was the

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only suitable offering. Now here you are, dwelling impotently on your toxic Olympus, with all the other self-worshipping titans. That's life, you may say, but I say death is better. It was natural for me to choose the underworld. I'm going to lose my voice trying to talk to you in here. Can't we go someplace quieter?

PERDITA: There is no place quieter, except the museum. But I've been to the museum too many times already, and here we can converse anonymously, and our voices won't stand out. I hardly notice the noise anymore; when I do notice it, it comforts me. Seeing you reminds me too much of the stillness of the country: the horrible silence when the snow was falling – nothing but the bland murmuring of the ghosts beneath the gravestones, hardly distinguishable from the incessant, never-changing rumble of the creek. Here living voices rise and drop, sirens and car horns flare up unevenly, combining and diverging like pieces in an orchestra, a thousand songs play from a windows and storefronts in every direction – you take a step and the whole world changes. But you! You never change. You're as static as the tombstones we used to hide among. All

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that's left for you to do is to fade, to wear away. It's been two years since we last met and I'm already bored to death looking at you. I wish you hadn't listened to me. I didn't really care to see you after all.

SILVANUS: What's happened to you is what happens to everyone in the city. You've lost your eye for subtlety. All you can see of me is that my clothes are no different than those I wore the last time we met, before you ran away. You expect that all I'll notice of you is how you've cropped your hair, and how you've changed the way you put on your makeup, and all the attention you put into looking as if you dressed yourself in a dark room, because only tiresome persons bother to match one article to another anymore. You've spent countless hours intently examining elephantine slabs of meaningless non-representational art, but after fifteen minutes sitting across from me, you still can't see how mortifying these last two years have been – how stoic I've had to become, to preserve my self-respect, my respect for anyone. If I had tried to alter myself, it only would have shown that I was trying to run away from the catastrophe I had created. But there was nowhere to run

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this time – no one to pull me out, no one to salvage me. My last and only choice was to welcome the loneliness that had chased me to that point; to call Solitude herself my soulmate. Even here, in this city, I'm alone, silently arm-in-arm with Solitude. Everyone here seems lonely to me – all except you. You're too empty. I used to wonder at how everywhere you went, your presence seemed to fill the place, to occupy every corner of it and charge the air so that it rushed in your direction. Now the place fills you. You're as dead and impersonal as the chair, the table, the cup, the menu. You've joined the scenery. Perhaps that means you've become the perfect writer. Perhaps I ought to congratulate you.

PERDITA: You seem to imply that you stayed where you were because you wanted to make a display of your contrition, as if you were some sort of transgendered Hester Prynne, concentrating the sins and hypocrisies of the village within yourself, then reflecting it back with a rearing of the head, a squaring of the shoulders, your oddity of a daughter prancing fittingly about your heels. Hester Prynne was an imbecile, and so are you. Nobody

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cared when you blew your marriage to the four winds, when you lost your house and tried to slit your wrists in your roommate's cabin, when all five members of your teenaged fan-club tore up their metaphorical membership cards and enrolled in acting classes taught by the New Hampshire hack your wife was giving herself to every night. You and I, we weren't even a sensation. All you're proving is that your mindset is even smaller than the town you come from. You can try to inflate your own self-manufactured mythology by pretending that you were driven out with shotguns cracking and dogs howling behind you, but you know very well that nobody even noticed you were gone, except the mothers of the girls you failed to seduce. I still talk to my old school friends; you can rest assured that your name never arises, not even as a point of ridicule. It may be that we're embarrassed to mention you; more likely, we've forgotten you completely. I've been "part of the scenery" for long enough in this city to learn that every one of the ten million people here has a story to tell, and not one of them is half as dull as yours.

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SILVANUS: Can the butcher know the pig's inner frenzy as he slits the poor beast's throat? Can the fryer of the bacon smell the torrents of blood in his pan? Can he hear the squeals of panic and anguish in the sizzling of the fat, while he smacks his lips and consoles his grumbling belly? Can the eater of the corn taste the field-hand's sweat? Can he hear the sighs of the farmer in bankruptcy? For you and your twittering associates, the demolition of my heart was nothing but a distant rumble, far behind you on a hill you had long since passed over. You had trodden lightly over my white streets, tasted my fares, dozed on my beds, and applauded my entertainments, neither suspecting nor caring that the ravages of Gomorrah would follow your departure, nor grieving when the news reached you farther down the road. You were simply glad to have escaped when you did, before the wrath of Heaven was emptied upon my spires, and the temples wherein you'd held your revels were pounded into pits of ash – laid to waste by the Justice you had joined me in mocking!

Do you remember how you came to my door, your hair and clothing all sopping with rain? How lonely it was

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at home, you said, and your friends, with their childish conversation, were no salve for your loneliness. Do you remember how I stopped my work and pressed a blanket 'round your shoulders, gave you tea and brandy to quell your clattering teeth, and spoke with you of books and God and poems – an afternoon squandered! – until the sun grew fat and red, and I paid your bus fare home? My wife returned from work minutes after you left, finding me in distracted spirits, and she asked why there were two teacups on the table! How many lies did I tell that wretched woman for your sake? I rescued you from your loneliness by guaranteeing my own, while my wife and I became like two trees on opposite sides of a rising brook, our roots rotting beneath us. Today, even today, I come – casting my dollars at the ticket-man, flinging my hours carelessly into the infinite – for no reason but that you asked me to.

PERDITA: I would have reconsidered my invitation, had I expected that you would do nothing but exhaust me with maudlin accounts of your two-penny domestic opera. And you wonder why I wearied of you so quickly before! Speaking to you has always been like conjuring a spirit from

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his grave, his wounds still bleeding though his flesh is gone, his movements still a pantomime of the moment of his death. I suppose I was sorry once for the part I played in your life's unraveling, but it was never fair or proper for you to think that I could be of any help to you when everything was done, and nothing could be recovered. I was as destitute in the company of my well-meaning friends as you were in the care of your long-suffering wife, our tumultuous temperaments finding each other when the world had grown too calm. It was fun while it lasted, but so much for all that! So long! Farewell! The bombs stopped falling and the soldiers all went their separate ways; all except you – shell-shocked beyond all recovery, you wander and rant through the overgrown battlefield, trying to raise your old chums from the trenches where their bones lay scattered, trampled, and charred. It's all very sad – I admit that it is! But for me to stay and suffer with you, when all I ever wanted you for was to help me escape my own misery – how simple you must be! You shouldn't have thrown the party if you couldn't pay the bill. I never did a thing to make you fall in love with me. I never said I'd be

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your ready and faithful mistress – your contingency plan! Besides, you had that already, and you still weren't happy.

SILVANUS: Wars only happen, my dear, when statesmen forget their place – when treaties are broken and secrets aren't kept. I remember one of the last things you said to me – so typical of you: "The world is full of pretty girls." It only proved how oblivious you were to the world you had stepped into – the world as it is to me. You thought I saw you in the way you see everyone, as diversions from the unbearable changelessness of life – a mere relief from boredom. But from the beginning, my life was the most delicate of structures. I admitted you to it with the utmost care, deluded by the conviction that you'd treat the post with reverence. You may be nothing but another pretty girl now – that much I'll venture; but there was a time and a place once in which you were one of a kind, and I – your lover – could be truly counted as the luckiest and unlikeliest of men. A noble wife and a vulgar mistress – upon such stones every good house is built. You, though, were unexpected. You were too magnificent to live without – too terrible to be bound up in oaths and raptures. For this

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reason I never tried to hold you to me. I quite confess that I esteemed you too much and gave you more trust than you deserved. I welcomed you as the worthiest of visitors, and you plundered me like a common thief, knocking lamps over as you made your inept and cowardly escape. I was too arrogant and love-drunk to prevent it. But you're mistaken if you suppose that I thought of you as something permanent, something of which I could be assured. You know too well that you were only my muse: useful while kept at a respectable distance. But it was the country – and the antipathy in which you held it – that activated your genius. Pretty girl or poet, whatever you may be, here in the city, you're as plain as a pigeon on the museum steps. I wish I could have saved you from the city.

PERDITA: How appropriate it is that you would want to keep me from the very place that makes me happy – the place for which nature has ordained me. If only you'd had the power, you would have held me in the country forever, chained me to your trees and your tombstones, until I became so fevered with loneliness and wanton despair, that I would turn to you – as I did in the beginning – as my only

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source of relief, my only recognizable solace. How grateful I am that those days were short-lived, when I craved the tones of your voice, and nearly crippled myself with sobbing in the days or weeks that passed between one secret rendezvous and the next, our craftily coordinated telephone calls, the letters whose interception we dreaded. Everything you did, you did to control me: visiting my house to hold audience with my father, knowing that all the while I would be in my bedroom, frantically wishing that I could come out and give you some sign, some token, a cautious word, a potent look. You would come to hear me sing, or read my poetry, or perform in those hideous pageants that I joined for entertainment, and afterward you would embrace me – your wife looking on with a robotic smile – and whisper something with your lips on the lobe of my ear: a hint at when I could call you next, or when you would next be in the village, alone and unengaged. You knew that I would listen, remember, and faithfully perform whatever was assigned, enthralled and bewildered as I was, and desperate not to offend or disappoint the only person in the world who was cruel enough to treat me as more

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than a child! What was I but a trinket to you? What, indeed, was anybody? For all the time you were busy as a spider at his web, and while I sank further and further into my incurable solitude, you were laying snares for my dearest friends, too – paying them the favors for which I longed, whispering to them those things which you swore were reserved for me, meeting them in groves, in churchyards, on river embankments – a private collection of muses, each one as oblivious and lovesick as the next. Then song after song would pour from your pen, and never a name was given – every one of us convinced that we were the subject – everyone but your wife, who grew haggard and nervous on a diet of your lies. Like every scheming wolf in every hackneyed storybook, you thrived on the innocence that only the country could provide, knowing that you had no rivals among the shambling rustics, the slow-witted illiterates with whom we had otherwise to associate. What a relief it was to turn the tricks upon the trickster – to confound you with your own devices when I learned I had been deceived – denying you, spurning you, exposing you to everyone! The last heart to break was your own, when

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everyone you had exploited and everyone you had fooled was past all sympathy, impervious to your wiles. But here in the city, innocence is a myth; everyone has his price tag, which he wears upon his breast. Greed and vanity have made pious merchants of us all, from the whore in her heels, to the indigent with his coffee-cup of coins, to the stockbroker with his golden money-clip – we're all in on the same hustle, though we may play for different stakes. No wonder you hate it here! Your gimmick is wasted on a crowd of hard-eyed vipers such as I've become – such as I'm only too glad to be.

SILVANUS: So you're invincible now, and – if I'm to take you at your word – it was I who made you that way. I always thought your ingratitude remarkable, but now I find it really grotesque. First you bury me up to my nostrils in a stewing pit of recrimination, then you reveal that you are now what you were always meant to be, only because Fate endowed me with the lamentable task of embittering you – of waylaying your girlhood at the cresting of its sweetness! But you give me more than my due. Even when you were only a child, before your mind or your beauty were evident

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to me, I detected upon you the whiff of ambition. The shaman and the showman are of one lineage after all! It would be an undeserved comfort to think that it was only I who drove you, in your little cloud of womanly jealousy, to flee your perdition of mountains and streams, and forget yourself in the hot pulse of humanity. It would be agreeable to accept so much power, however regrettably it might have been employed. Alas! though I could very well sense the ineluctable magnetism of the metropolis upon your soul, it was never in my power to direct or dispel it. For a fraction of a moment I hoped that fascination could hold it in abatement, but the certainty of my failure was obvious from the start – which is why I have said that to retain your love forever – that is, to retain you as a lover – was never my object. You have misapprehended far more than I first presumed, and it is hardly surprising to me now why you took your flight from the village when you did, while I was too preoccupied by scandal and the scandal-mongers to take notice, or to make my plea against it. You called the mob down upon me and fled unimpeded while it was at its grisly work – stealthily eluding your portion of the infamy,

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and claiming as your justification these very errors, which even today – even now – allow you to persist in your invidious calumniations. Now I beg your indulgence while I make the answer that I have, for these two years, reserved in silence.

PERDITA: My indulgence? I've indulged you too much already.

SILVANUS: The patience I ask of you in receiving my apology shall be immeasurably less than that which I have shown in awaiting my chance to speak it. Surely you didn't ask me here for nothing.

PERDITA: But I did. It is just as you said: I asked you here for nothing but your own perturbation – not because I wanted to see you, but because I wanted you to see me. Vanity is not the least of my newly gotten virtues: you will find that I am impatient and quite pitiless as well. Speak if you wish to; I'll leave when it pleases me.

SILVANUS: Then I'll speak as plainly as my nature will allow. My dear: to be a man is to be a devil. The first time

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that I told you this, you nodded your head without replying, and regarded me as if I had spoken in an alien tongue. Sometime later I said it again; your gaze dropped from mine and you quietly answered that you could not bring yourself to believe it. I said it a third time, and you firmly retorted that it wasn't true: that to be a man was merely to be a man, and that no man, however evil his actions, is anything other than a man. I asked you: Do you say then that men are good? You answered: I think that most men are more good than bad. I asked you: Do you say, then, that I am good? You answered: I very much hope that you are. Then I laughed at you, and you went away darkened, telling me later that you spent the whole night crying. That, I said, was what I had intended. I did it to prove that men are devils, and that I am no different than the rest. You asked me: Am I a devil too? I looked at you, sad and serious, and I answered: Yes, even you.

PERDITA: What a disgusting exercise. I remember it distinctly. I should have known from that moment what you were about. I did know – and yet I remained, and took your council. It seems quite incredible to me now.

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SILVANUS: Does it? You ran from the country, where your trust in me had been betrayed, and you came to the city, where trust is a fiction, and betrayal is the highest law, where avarice, debauchery, pettiness, selfishness, and incivility are as indispensable to life as the air itself, and still it seems incredible that I should tell you men are devils? You can't deny, surely, that I am a devil. And you must admit, now that you have left all your kind old friends, and gladly settled in this most infernal of places, to trade in the torments of noise, and filth, and stench, and sex, and ostentation, and squalor, that you are a devil too. We somehow come up from childhood believing that to be human is to be more good than bad, and yet the more humans we fit together in a single place, the worse they all become. Who, then, is crazier: the person who calls himself human and says that only madmen believe in devils, or the person who calls himself a devil and says that only madmen believe in humans? If I wanted to fool you, my dear, I would have. Instead I showed you the truth, which your parents, and your teachers, and your elders, and all who

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have joined in condemning and reviling me, would have concealed from you.

PERDITA: The corruption and disillusionment of young girls is not so wonderful a feat as you suppose. True, it is unavoidable. But everything vicious and gruesome in life is unavoidable, and the less avoidable a thing is, the grosser we reckon it to be. No one looks at a debased, conniving, adulterous drunkard like you and sees a hero - even in a society as reprobate as ours.

SILVANUS: So you say, and yet a hero was what I was to you. You admired me as a writer and as a philosopher, insignificant though my accomplishments were. You listened earnestly to me when I discoursed spontaneously on politics, religion, literature, music, and every subject to which my sophistry directed me. You made yourself sick sometimes, refusing food and sleep when you could think of no suitable answer to some idle question I had posed, or could not reconcile yourself to some moral or logical paradox I had shunted your way. You were the finest pupil any teacher could have wanted, and the finest muse a poet

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ever had: as long as I knew you, my well was never dry – I wrote as I had never written before, spoke as I had never spoken. Meanwhile, your suffering was unutterable. As perplexed and unsettled as you were by the self-canceling doctrines I spouted, you were a hundred times more divided over me as a man, as a friend, as mentor, as a lover, as a rival, as a corrupter, as the father of another girl, as the husband of another woman. It is not too bold of me, I do not think, to say that the devil you were becoming made the devil I already was the object of its idolatry – but in the same fashion that men must always worship their devils: that is, secretly. As it concerned the rest of the world, you denounced me more and more – sneering at the mention of my name, decrying my writings among your father and his league of clapboarded pseudo-intellectuals, and slandering me in the presence of your friends, who, as a consequence, being inchoate devil-worshippers themselves, grew only more curious about me.

But do not accuse me too soon of inordinate self-flattery. Although our two melodramas devolved simultaneously upon the same course, they were connected

by only the thinnest thread: this mutual but ineffectual obsession that I was somehow yours and you were somehow mine; that however antagonistic we grew in spirit, we were nevertheless bound by the same destiny. We each told the other that our love was indestructible, each to dissuade ourselves from the unavoidable truth, that two persons could scarcely have despised each other more than we.

The fact is that you had outpaced me. I do not say, “surpassed,” for my function in regards to you was spiritual, not artistic, and there was no scale upon which our two bodies of work could be laid and compared. But when our affair began, I was an intemperate philanderer with a head full of platitudinous rubbish, and through the years of our romance (so-called, though it barely deserves the name), that is precisely what I remained – growing, perhaps, a little more intemperate along the way. You, however, were an untouched, unaffected slip of a girl, who hardly knew herself from a pincushion. Like any girl of fourteen, you imagined in your heart that it was proper for you to fall in love, hoping – as was natural – that

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whomever you found to plight yourself to, would in his mind, person, and spirit resolve those portions of yourself that were yet beyond your reach; by this I mean that he would find in you what you were seeking in yourself, but hadn't the eyes to uncover. Doubtless, you glanced about at your peers and schoolmates, but saw – among the boys, at least – that childhood was far from loosening its hand upon them. Then you looked among the men who gathered at your father's table, and found yourself disappointed by how they seemed to look past you, as through a glass pane, and how they addressed you in condescending tones, as if you were still burbling insensibly from a high-seat, and how their noses were bulbous and filled with hairs, and how their haughty physiognomies seemed to hang like badly-tailored costumes from their bones.

How fortuitous, then – how extraordinary – that we met when we did, in the perfect place, at the perfect time, each of us anxious for what only the other could provide! At the village salon, on a warm Thursday night, in midsummer –

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PERDITA: It was a Wednesday.

SILVANUS: Wednesday then –

PERDITA: In late August – closer to September.

SILVANUS: Was it really? I suppose you remember better than I do. Women have such a way with dates; that old cliché about the husband's misremembered anniversary – although I don't believe I ever forgot any of mine. Except – well! Now that I think of it, I can't remember at all the date that I married my first wife! I suppose it must have been in – in March, since the baby was born in April. But on what day? Good God – it's left me completely! I wonder if that will happen in regards to my second marriage's anniversary as well. I don't see how it could, since it's precisely three months after my birthday, and one month before your birthday, which I also never manage to forget. What an accursed coincidence! But – damn it, what was I saying?

PERDITA: To be honest, I was trying not to listen too closely. Another advantage of the city is that everything

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around one tends to dissolve into an endless, omnipresent drone, which is really quite musical when listened to as a whole, without any one strain of it extracted for particular attention. If that to which one is presently listening becomes uninteresting, it's wonderfully easy to simply slip away into the ambient hum of everything around one, or to divert one's focus to some different section of it. The man behind me, for instance, is speaking Swedish, or Norwegian, or Icelandic or something. It's an ugly language, whatever it is – the way the inflections dip toward the end of a phrase, but do not fall off completely, as happens in English. It goes down for a moment, then pops right back up again – like a vessel on an ocean. I wonder if it comes from being a seafaring people.

SILVANUS: But the English were a seafaring people as well, as were the Greeks, and –

PERDITA: I spent the night with a Swede not very long ago: a well-mannered gentleman who said he was from Gothenburg. He was extremely generous and accommodating. His name I can't recall. A bit on the old

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side – but in admirable condition. He was a sculptor of some kind, making large metal pieces, inspired by the constellations, apparently. One of the better galleries are carrying several of his constructions, which are quite unruly, and must be suspended from the ceiling by cables. He bought me a whole bottle of very good Swedish vodka. After that we made love, and he showed me photographs of his wife, which is a curious thing that a curious number of men seem curiously inclined to do. They talk about how pretty their wives are, and how the photograph doesn't do them justice, and how marriage is a queer institution, but it's a fine thing once one can find one's way around it, because it's not the way it was for our parents and their parents anymore, when nobody seemed to know or care very much about human nature. This one, the Swede, said that every time he makes love to his wife, he can't help but imagine her as some other woman – a stranger of some kind; but when he was making love to me, he said that all he could think of was his wife, or else he wouldn't have been able to go through with it, however beautiful I was, et cetera. He wanted to take a picture of me, to bring back

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with him, to remember me with, but I wouldn't allow it. It seemed almost like taking a picture of a birthday cake before eating it, which is another thing I've never understood. It's like that metaphor: to have one's cake and eat it too. My grandfather the communist used to laugh at that phrase. He'd say: How indicative it is of a society like ours, that one can own something, but not enjoy it, and that one can scarcely enjoy something without feeling as if one owns it. But nobody really owns anything, except the banks! And nobody really enjoys anything, because they're all too busy trying to find ways to own things.

So when a man shows me a photograph of his wife, all I can figure is that he's trying to show me that he really does own something – something that he ought to enjoy – something that he has enjoyed, and could still enjoy, if he wanted to. Which is why I wouldn't let the Swede take my picture, of course – because then he would own me, in a way. I never want to see him again, God knows! It would be awfully unfair if he could see me anytime he liked – showing me off to his friends in Sweden, saying: 'That's my

girl in America. American girls will do anything for a bottle of vodka.

PART VII:

**THE TERMINAL EXHALATION OF
THE LAST REMAINING GOOD**

A LETTER, FEBRUARY, 2009

Damien,

this may seem completely random, and indeed it is, and i am not even sure that you keep this e-mail address anymore. I just felt the necessity to end the cliff hanger left the never-answered e-mail you sent me so long ago. the reason that i am even typing this message is that i am sitting here with "X." conversing about the last years happenings, specifically the correspondences between the so called "circle". After much thought and consideration, we have decided that the entirety of the goings-on were a Alice in Wonderland world. Of course none of

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this can truly be described...nothing that was ever said made any sense in reality. We were curious as to your well-being.

~"Y." and "X."

My Dear "Y." and "X.",

I:

The unexpected receipt of your puzzling (and doubtless unpremeditated) little letter was accompanied by the usual palpitations. I laughed at myself for answering to the resurgent impulse of former times, by reading the note in a few glances, and then shuffling it furtively out of sight, even though there is nobody now from whom I am obliged to conceal it. Some instincts, however outgrown, will never perish; and some thrills, however bitterly tinged, will indeed never cease to electrify. The value to which I have always ascribed your letters – *any* of your letters – need hardly be elucidated. Like the Biblical merchant who sold all he owned when he had discovered the “pearl of great price,” my faithfulness is evinced by my destitution. (But again,

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“Think not that I come to bring peace, but a sword, etc., etc.”)

II:

I am not yet so ascetically progressed as to be ungratified when I hear that the two of you are not only still speaking to each other, but are on occasion still inspired to speak of me, or of us – that is, the Circle, such as it was or might have been. The conversation that led to your note was one that I would have liked, in particular, to hear. Though you were almost certainly glad to be spared the devious mutations of reason that are now so commonly held as indispensable to my perspective, and to my pernicious elocutions. Now that the rusty door has swung the other way, however, and a response – of sorts – has been invited, I will attempt not to feel too insipid for offering one.

III :

In the main, I am curious to know how this allusion or comparison to *Alice in Wonderland* ever came about, in connection to the disorganized cadre of jealous hearts

formerly and inconsistently referred to as the Circle. The book to which you refer concerns a girl who pursues her subconscious into a world of contradictions, impossibilities, perversions, and reversals of waking reality. I can only speak for myself in this regard, but when I read Lewis Carroll's work as a child (*Wonderland* and *Looking-glass*, both during one rainy day, at the age of eight or nine), it had only the off-putting effect of making me strangely glad, upon finishing, to re-enter what was then a very unsavory and impecunious experience of the commonplace world. Nightmare that my childhood was, I nevertheless preferred the real nightmare to the false one prescribed by the White Rabbit and Co., and soon thereafter resolved quite unswervingly to never again bother myself with works of fantasy. I have ever since considered myself an opponent of delusion and a despiser of frivolity: hence my apparently paradoxical disregard for the nihilistic blithering of such as Kafka and Beckett. One escapes the mundane not by indulging an untamed imagination, I have always said, but by nullifying the mundane with the realization that nothing is really predictable. For those who find pleasure in terror

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and chaos, the world is already a paradise. Fiction is invariably a simplification of reality, more than it is a subversion or distortion of it. As the old adage attests, the truth is stranger still, and more painful, because fiction only requires the so-called “suspension of disbelief,” while reality requires us to believe that which our hearts cannot find space for, and our minds cannot uphold.

IV:

The role of Alice in her Wonderland was to represent immutable reality in a place where the rational laws as we know them seemed to hold little or no currency. In fact, what Carroll did was create a world that was too rational – in which the proverbial monsoon created by the butterfly’s sneeze was thrown up instantly and in plain view, rather than being submerged beneath innumerable intermediate and corollary events, as happens in our own world, to our very constant distress. Alice’s world was monstrous, because in it, a chess game was an actual field of battle, not merely a whimsical (and therefore diabolical) simulacrum thereof. And when Alice wept herself a deluge, she was

given the attractive possibility of literally drowning in her sorrows, whereas we in the crude and unaccommodating real world must go on crying and crying until discovering indirect release by throwing ourselves off a bridge. When we place a pencil in a glass of water, and our eyes discern that the image of the pencil beneath the water's surface has become separated from that which protrudes above, we call it a distortion. Yet how else are we to believe something, but by seeing it with our own eyes? Thus the distortion is of greater substance to us than the reality beneath it. In the same way are we all inhabiting and perpetually experiencing the grand, inescapable parlor trick that is observable and experiential truth. We live half above the surface and half below, and are forever divided between two antagonistic substances – one distorting the other, but both equally real. We are tempted to clutch and to bend, but our only possible relief comes in straightening, in transcending the *maya* that is inherent perception, and in fixating upon equanimity while reposing upon anguish.

V:

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Think, now, of what comprised the Circle – from what and from whom it was formed. If all parties are to be taken into account, those in the “inner” and the “outer” Circle, those in the first Circle, and those who replaced them to become the second, there are only two elements that can be regarded as common among them. The first is that the Circle was always comprised of persons connected to the Theatre in Phoenicia, which is really incidental, and the second is that they were all bound – in part, at least – by their association with me. It might even be proposed that no Circle ever existed, except that I said it existed, and maintained its existence by assuring that it was always being freshly repopulated. It is only in this way that the two of you could have been said to be in it together, although at the time, neither acknowledged the other as being a component of the same unit. You were each writing to me more or less simultaneously, though with unequal frequency, and therefore it was you who comprised the Circle. The designation in all probability meant nothing to either of you. I assigned it for my own sake, to provide myself with the consoling semblance of continuity, and

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therefore fatefulness – even purpose. This does not make the Circle an illusion or a fabrication: it only momentarily limits the extent to which it may be considered a functional or useful reality.

VI:

Membership, however, was not merely a result of corresponding with me. I have generally had correspondents of one kind or another, and only a slender selection of these were openly or privately held to be included in the Circle. You were qualified as fixtures within the Circle by the *quality* of correspondence that we shared, and by the intent or presumed intent underlying the whole. That quality, in the plainest of terms, was Love. There was nobody in the Circle that I did not with the unfettered fullness of my feeble being *love*, with a love that surpassed casual perception, and could be understood and realized only as an act of Faith.

VII :

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Agonized as I am by it, I understand why you would conclude, as you have, that the matters spoken of in our letters were the fabulous stuff of dream, whimsy, and fanciful romance; I never expected otherwise, but that what I beheld as truth, would be regarded as calumny – even blasphemy – by others. If I ever acted surprised by this, I did so as an observation of propriety, in obeisance to Fate. Our purpose was never to occupy the Promised Land ourselves – only to kindle the star that shines above it, and warn of the travails in store for them that seek it out. The path of sages is inevitably paved in exile, and what is today a forlorn tomb amongst impassable crags, is tomorrow a glorious shrine, and the object of somber pilgrimage.

VIII:

In this way, we are and have been only the servants of history. All that you have denied will become, in the hearts of others, the most unassailable cause for affirmation; from our piddling failure, a thousand victories and miraculous feats will sprout. Why do we mock the inevitable, saying, “Such and such was only this, and all of this was nothing?”

INFIDELITY

We, who live amongst these Catskill peaks, where once only a faceless glacier slept beneath an unmet sky. Even by saying we have failed do we prove our own arrogance.

IX:

In the months we spent backstage together, what I saw in you was the terminal exhalation of the last remaining Good. What I heard was a death-rasp that ought to have been a song, a hymn, a hosanna-in-the-highest. I realized with you that we were the last of a species that had too long put off its own extinction, and could do no honor to Heaven until we it scaled the limits of sacrifice. We caught each other in our wilting, and with our red petals we laid a carpet down, and with white petals we formed a shroud, and we anointed our grave with the nectar of our tongues. All at once, my heart was pierced by the thorns, the scourge, the nails and the spear. You, "X.," were the tears of Mary, and you, "Y.," were her feet, who carried her first to the tomb, and her hands, which held the incense. My cheek already burning with a traitor's kiss, my chest already seething with an adulterer's heart, my eyes already stinging

INFIDELITY

from the dust of the sepulcher – how could I not have known you? How could I not have loved you, and loved you last of all? “Let the dead bury their dead,” and let my Magdalenes bury me.

X:

Out of all that you have taught me, dear sisters, the greatest lesson is patience.

Always Yours,

-D.T.T.

THE END